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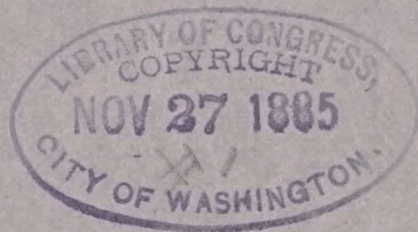
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A BARREN TITLE

40
A Novel



BY T. W. SPEIGHT

AUTHOR OF "THE MYSTERIES OF HERON DYKE" ETC.

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
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A BARREN TITLE.

CHAPTER I.

SHABBY-GENTEEL.

IT was about half-past two on a sunny February afternoon when Mr. John Fildew put his nose—aquiline and slightly purple as to its ridge—outside the door of his lodgings for the first time that day, and remarked to himself, with a shiver, that the weather was “beastly cold.” After gazing up the street and down the street, and seeing nothing worth looking at, he shut the door behind him and strolled leisurely away.

Hayfield Street, in which Mr. Fildew’s lodgings were situate, was, despite its name, as far removed, both in appearance and associations, from anything suggestive of country or rural life as it well could be. It was of the town towny. Every house in it—and they were substantial, well-built domiciles, dating back some seventy or more years ago—was let out to three or four families, while in many cases the ground-floors had been converted into shops, in one or other of which anything might be bought, from a second-hand silk dress or sealskin jacket to a pennyworth of fried fish or a succulent cow-heel.

In whatever part of the street you took your stand a couple of taverns were well within view, and, as a matter of course, there was a pawnbroker's emporium "just round the corner." It is needless to say that the street swarmed with children of all ages and all sizes, and that you might make sure of having the dulcet tones of a barrel-organ within ear-shot every ten minutes throughout the day. It was situate somewhat to the west of Tottenham-court Road, and ran at right angles with one of the main arteries that intersect that well-known thoroughfare.

In this populous locality Mr. Fildew and his wife rented a drawing-room floor, consisting of three rooms, and including the use of a kitchen below stairs; and here they had lived for between six and seven years at the time we make Mr. Fildew's acquaintance. As we shall see a great deal of that gentleman before the word *Finis* is written to this history, it may perhaps be as well to introduce him with some particularity to the reader before setting out with him on his afternoon stroll.

John Fildew at this time was about fifty-two years of age, but looked somewhat older. Thirty years previously he had been accounted a very handsome man, and there were still sufficient traces of bygone good looks to make credible such a tradition. But the once clear-cut aquiline nose was now growing more coarse and bibulous-looking with every year, and the once shapely waist was putting on a degree of convexity that troubled its possessor far more than any other change that time had seen fit to afflict him with. As yet he was by no means

bald, and his iron-gray hair, however thin it might be at the crown, was still plentiful at the sides and back, and being seldom operated upon by the tonsorial scissors, its long, straggling ends mingled with the tangled growth of his whiskers and lay on the collar of his coat behind. Grizzled, too, were whiskers, beard, and mustache, but all unkempt and apparently uncared for, growing as they listed, and only impatiently snipped at now and again by Mr. Fildew himself, when his mustache had grown so long as to be inconvenient at meal-times. His eyes were his best feature. They were dark, piercing, and deep-set, and were overhung by thick, bushy brows, which showed as yet no signs of age. Their ordinary expression was one of cold, quiet watchfulness, but they were occasionally lighted up by gleams of a grim, sardonic humor, accompanied by a half-contemptuous smile; and at such times it was possible to understand how it happened that many not over-observant people came to regard him as a genial, good-hearted, easy-tempered fellow, when, in truth, there was scarcely one touch of real geniality in his composition.

Unshorn and unkempt as Mr. Fildew might appear as regards his hair and whiskers, shabby-genteel as he might be in point of attire, he still carried himself as one who holds himself superior in some measure to the ordinary run of his fellows. His boots might bear unmistakable traces of having been patched, but they were carefully polished and well-set up at the heels. His trousers might be old, and it is possible that they too might be patched on cer-

tain parts not visible to the public eye, but they were well ironed at the knees, and were strapped over his boots *à la militaire*. His frock-coat—always worn tightly buttoned—might be threadbare, inked here and there at the seams, and not after the latest fashion, but it had the merit of being an excellent fit. His hat, too, might be of ancient date, and suspiciously shiny in places, but it was always carefully brushed, and was worn with an air of assurance and *aplomb* that made its defects seem superior to the virtues of many newer head-coverings. Mr. Fildew's linen might be old, possibly darned, but such portion of it as was visible to the world at large was at least spotlessly white: there was some one at home who took care of that. His attire was completed by a deep, military-looking stock, a pair of faded buckskin gloves, and a substantial Malacca cane with a silk tassel. Being naturally a little short-sighted, he always carried an eyeglass, but rarely made use of it in the streets.

And yet Mr. Fildew's shabby attire was not altogether a matter of necessity with him. One day his son Clement ventured to say, "Father, I wish you would go to my tailor, and let him set you up with some new toggery."

Clem was brushing the collar of his father's coat at the time, and the remark was made laughingly, but Mr. Fildew turned with a scowl and confronted his son. "Confound your tailor, sir!" he cried. "And you, too," he added next moment. "Do you think I'm a pauper, that you offer to pay for my clothes? If you are ashamed to be seen out with

me, remember, sir, that there are always two sides to a street." And with that Mr. Fildew turned on his heel in high dudgeon.

Clement and his mother exchanged glances of dismay. "You know how peculiar your father is, dear," said Mrs. Fildew afterwards, "and what little things sometimes touch his dignity. It was injudicious of you to say what you did."

Clement shrugged his shoulders. "I have lived with my father all my life, and yet I confess that I only half understand him," said the young man. "At times he is a complete enigma to me."

"I have lived with him more years than you have, and I think that I almost understand him: almost, but not quite," responded Mrs. Fildew, with a smile. "But then a woman always does understand a man better than another man can hope to do."

Clement Fildew might well say that his father was an enigma to him. Although the latter refused so indignantly to allow his son to be at the expense of refurnishing his wardrobe, he was not too proud to accept from him his weekly supply of pocket-money. But then the money in question found its way from Clement's pocket to that of his father after such a delicate and diplomatic fashion that the susceptibilities of Mr. Fildew had never hitherto been wounded in the transaction. Every Friday Clement placed in his mother's hands the sum of one guinea. The sovereign and shilling in question were wrapped up by Mrs. Fildew in a piece of tissue-paper, and quietly deposited by her in a certain drawer in her husband's dressing-table. By Saturday morning the tiny

packet would have disappeared. No questions were asked; neither Mrs. Fildew nor her husband ever spoke to each other on the matter; but silence has often a meaning of its own, and it had in this case.

Mr. Fildew having shut the door of his lodgings behind him, walked slowly down the street with the preoccupied air of a man who is busily communing with himself. "I must ask Clem to lend me half a sovereign," he muttered. "The necessity is an unpleasant one, but there's no help for it. I feel certain I could have given that fellow last night a drubbing at a carom game, but he was too many for me at the spot stroke. *Experientia docet.*"

Unfastening a couple of buttons of his frock-coat, Mr. Fildew inserted a thumb and finger into his waistcoat pocket, and drew therefrom a sixpence. "My last coin," he murmured. "I really must not touch a cue again for another month."

Mr. Fildew was methodical in many of his habits. There was one tavern at which he made a point of calling within ten minutes of leaving home every afternoon. It had a little dark, private bar with cane-bottomed stools, where the gas was kept half turned on all day long. Here *Punch* and other comic papers were always to be found. Somehow, Mr. Fildew liked the place, but although he had called at it daily for years, no one behind the bar knew either his name or anything about him. He now pushed open the swing-doors and went in. In answer to his nod—there was no need for him to speak—the barman brought him fourpennyworth of

brown brandy and cold water, together with a minute portion of cheese on the point of a knife. Mr. Fildew munched his cheese, glanced at the cartoon in *Punch*, sipped up his brandy-and-water, nodded a second time to the barman, and went.

Mr. Fildew walked jauntily along, whistling under his breath. The brandy had imparted a glow to his feelings and a glow to his imagination: the flame would soon drop down again, he knew, but he was philosopher enough to enjoy it while it lasted.

Elderly, shabby-genteel individuals are by no means scarce about the West End of London on sunny afternoons—inveterate *flâneurs* whose “better days” are over forever. But Mr. Fildew was something more than merely shabby-genteel; there was about him a style, a carriage, an air undefinable, but not to be mistaken, of broken-down distinction, which induced many passers-by to turn and glance at him a second time as he “took” the pavement with his slow military stride, his eyes fixed straight before him, and his nose held high in air.

In a few minutes he found himself in Oxford Street. Crossing this as soon as there was a break in the string of vehicles, he took his way towards the mazes of Soho. Stopping at a certain door, he gave one loud rap with the knocker followed by two quick ones, and next moment the door opened, apparently of its own accord, and Mr. Fildew walked in, after which the door shut itself behind him. He had evidently been there before, for without a moment's hesitation he ascended the first flight of stairs, turned to the left down a short passage, and,

opening a door at the end of it, found himself in a roomy and well-lighted studio.

Its only occupant was a very little bandy-legged man with a luxuriant crop of curly hair, who was sitting on a low stool in front of a big canvas, palette and brush in hand and a brier-root pipe between his teeth. John Fildew looked round with an air of disappointment.

"Clem not at home?" he asked of the little man.

"Oh, Mr. Fildew, is that you?" said the latter, turning quickly. "I thought it was Clem come back. He's gone to see Pudgin, the dealer. Won't be long, I dare say."

"This is the third time I've called and not found him at home."

"Ah, just your luck, ain't it?" said the other, coolly. It would almost have seemed from the way he spoke as if he held Mr. Fildew in no particular regard.

The latter made no reply, but strode across the room and came to a halt immediately behind the little painter.

"I'm putting the finishing touches to the *pedes* of my saint, Mr. Fildew. I wonder whether the holy men of olden time were ever troubled with corns or bunions. I suppose it wouldn't do to paint them with any. Rather too realistic, eh?"

"Intended for the Academy, I suppose?"

"If their high mightinesses will deign to find it hanging room—which is somewhat problematical."

Mr. Fildew's cough plainly implied, "I should think it very problematical indeed."

"Now, about Clem's picture I don't think there can be any doubt whatever," said the generous-hearted little man. "They must be dolts, indeed, if they reject that. It's far and away the best thing Clem's done yet. That boy, sir, has a great career before him."

"From a painter's point of view, I presume you mean?" said Mr. Fildew, with a sneer.

"Precisely so. From a painter's point of view. What other point of view could you expect me to take?"

"No other, I suppose. *Chacun à son métier*. But the words, 'a great career,' hardly associate themselves in my mind with anything achieved by means of a brush and a paint-pot."

"A paint-pot, indeed! Let me tell you, sir—but you are only chaffing me, Mr. Fildew—only trying to set my Welsh blood boiling that you may have a quiet laugh at me in your sleeve. But, joking apart, sir, you ought really to have a look at Clem's picture. It's there on the other easel. Shall I lift the cover for you?"

"Not to-day, thank you, Macer. I'm not i' the vein. How is it possible for a man to have any proper appreciation of the fine arts who hasn't a sou in the world to bless himself with?"

"If I might venture to offer, Mr. Fildew—" said Macer, doubtfully. He knew something of his visitor's queer moods and sudden spurts of temper, and shook in his shoes as he made the offer.

"Just what I was coming to. You're a good fellow, Macer," responded Mr. Fildew, with much af-

fability. Tony felt immensely relieved. "The truth is, I just looked in to see whether Clem had a spare half-sovereign about him; I've run rather short, as most of us do at odd times."

"If you are in a hurry, Mr. Fildew, and you will allow me—" said Macer, as he opened his purse.

"Thanks. Yes, I am in a hurry, and you can settle with Clem, you know;" and so the half-sovereign was quietly transferred to Mr. Fildew's pocket.

"Any message for Clem, Mr. Fildew?"

"No, I think not, Macer. You may just tell him that his mother seems a little more cheerful and in less pain yesterday and to-day. But, really, I don't wish you to burden your memory with such a trifle."

"It won't seem a trifle to Clem. I could not tell him anything that would please him better."

"Hum! Not even the news that the Academy had accepted his picture?" asked Mr. Fildew, dryly.

"Not even to hear that would afford him the pleasure he would derive from knowing that his mother was really better."

"Ah, yes, Clem's a good boy; a model son in every way." Macer looked up quickly, but Mr. Fildew, with his glass in his eye, was apparently contemplating a cobweb in a far corner of the room. "But I must go now," he added, as he turned on his heel. "Don't forget to ask Clem for the half-sovereign; and if neither of you should be so fortunate as to have your picture hung by the Academy, I hope you won't go and hang yourselves instead." And, with one of

his peculiar smiles and a curt nod of the head, he left the room.

“Poor Clem! What a pity Providence didn’t provide him with a different kind of father,” said Tony Macer, as he turned to his work again. “Egad! if the fellow were worth ten thousand a year, he could hardly give himself more airs.”

CHAPTER II.

AT THE BROWN BEAR.

THE Brown Bear, the tavern usually patronized by Mr. Fildew of an evening, was situate in a quiet street no great distance from Bloomsbury Square. It was one of the few taverns dating from a bygone generation that had escaped the hands of the modern innovator. It could boast no plate-glass windows lighted up with a score of gas-jets. There was plenty of old mahogany, black with age, to be seen inside the bar, but there were no mirrors and no gilding; neither was there any lavish display of colored glass or artificial shrubs. You went down one step from the street into the bar, the floor of which was sprinkled with sand, as in the days when George the Third was king. A huge oaken beam supported the ceiling. On a topmost shelf stood a couple of immense punchbowls backed by some flagons of antique design, and below them were several bottles of Schiedam and other liquors that had been ripening for a dozen years. There was an air of sombre substantiality about the whole place.

Behind the bar was the "coffee-room," so called. Straight-backed, rush-bottomed chairs occupied three sides of it, in front of which were ranged four or five oblong tables, black with age and much polish-

ing. At the upper end of the room was an elaborately carved arm-chair, where the president or chairman for the evening took his seat, opposite which stood a brass box containing tobacco, the lid of which flew open as often as a halfpenny was dropped through an orifice at the opposite end. A few smoke-dried prints of coaching and sporting subjects, and three or four pipe-racks, decorated the walls.

The general public were not allowed to invade this sanctum; for them there was another room at the opposite end of the bar. The coffee-room was set apart and kept sacred for a certain set of regular customers, and such private friends as they might choose to bring with them from time to time, who, year in and year out, made a point of spending their evenings at the Brown Bear. Some there were who put in an appearance almost every night, some of them showed up only two or three times a week, but they were all known to each other and to the landlord, the freemasonry of good-fellowship, or what passed among them as such, being the one bond that kept them together. Several of them were small tradesmen of the neighborhood, two or three were connected with the law, a few of them were men whose work in this world was over, and who were ekeing out the remainder of their days on some small pension or private means of their own.

At nine P.M. such of the company as might be present voted one of their number into the chair, a post which it was not considered etiquette to vacate till the clock struck twelve. At ten o'clock they were generally joined by the landlord, who, on such occa-

sions, ordered and paid for what he drank like an ordinary customer. The last proceeding of each evening was for the chairman to treat such of the company as might be left to "goes" of grog at his own expense; one cannot expect to have the honors of this world thrust upon one without having to pay for them.

It is quite possible that some of the frequenters of the Brown Bear were drawn thither by the love of hearing themselves talk, and of having others to listen to them, rather than by any more convivial motives. As a consequence, the affairs of the nation were discussed and settled, and the proceedings of the party in power impugned or approved of, as the case might be, to the satisfaction of everybody concerned; while such minor topics as the weather, the crops, the last murder, or the latest scandal in high life, did not fail to come in for their due share of attention. Some old fogies there were who scarcely opened their lips except to order their grog, or to interject an "exactly" or a "just so" at the proper moment, whenever any particular proposition was pointedly aimed at them, but who otherwise puffed placidly at their pipes in stolid silence. These non-talkers were by no means among the least popular of the company, for how can a man who feels called upon to enlighten his fellow-citizens do so with any satisfaction to himself unless he has appreciative listeners? That those others chose to be listeners rather than talkers was by no means put down to any obtuseness of intellect on their part, for are we not taught that a still tongue is a sign of a wise head? and a man may

be brimful of wisdom, and yet be at pains to conceal that fact from his fellows.

Among such a company as this it might almost have seemed as if a man like Mr. Fildew would hardly have felt himself at home; but such was by no means the case. The truth is, that the majority of the frequenters of the Brown Bear, that is to say, the small tradesmen portion of them, looked up to our friend and yet looked down upon him. They looked down upon him because they had a suspicion, which, in their case, was next to a certainty, that he was always in a chronic state of impecuniosity; because they themselves had their snug little investments in one form or other, and could have bought him up, root and branch, a hundred times over; and, finally, because it is one of the blessed privileges of those who have money to look down on those who have none. They looked up to Fildew because there was something about the man which told them he had at one time belonged to a sphere from which they were forever debarred. Through all his poverty and shabbiness, a faint aroma of fashion and high life seemed still to cling to him. The popular notion at the Brown Bear was that he had at one time been an officer in some crack regiment, who had ruined himself by gambling and been discarded by his friends. If he spoke of the aristocracy, which, to give him credit, was but rarely, he spoke as though he were one to the manner born. He seemed to know Eton and Oxford as well as he knew Tottenham-court Road, and to be familiar with most of the West End clubs. A nobleman's name could hardly

be mentioned without his being able to tell something about him that the frequenters of the Brown Bear had never heard of before. In his very way of talking, in his mode of accentuating his words, there was an indefinable something which marked him out at once from the ordinary frequenters of the coffee-room of the B. B. They knew, these petty tradesmen, that "His Grace" looked down upon them from the height of some, to them, invisible pedestal; and they in turn looked down upon him from the serene height of their money-bags; and yet, as they argued among themselves when he was not by, he must, to a certain extent, have liked their company, else why did he seek it so persistently night after night the year round?

It was about half-past eight this evening when John Fildew walked into the bar of the Brown Bear. He nodded to the landlord, and that worthy at once touched a spring inside the bar which communicated with the door of the coffee-room, after which the door opened to Fildew's hand, and he entered. With one man in the room he shook hands, to the rest of the company he vouchsafed a general and comprehensive nod. Then he took a vacant chair, and having called for a "go" of brandy cold, he proceeded to select a churchwarden pipe from a heap on the table before him and to charge it with tobacco.

"How's the weather by this time, your grace?" asked Mr. Nutt, the shoemaker. "It was just wetting a bit when I came in."

"The stars are out again," said Fildew, answering

to the title as a matter of course. "Not much likelihood of any rain to-night."

It was not often that he joined in the discussions, political or otherwise, that were pretty sure to crop up before the evening was at an end. He generally sat a silent if not an amused listener. If appealed to directly he would give his opinion, but not otherwise. That curious, sneering smile of his would now and then light up his features at the enunciation by one or other of his friends of some more wildly outrageous statement than common, but for the most part he and his pipe held silent session together and troubled no one with what they thought.

It was quite understood in the room why Mr. Fildew should shake hands with Mr. Denzil and no one else. Mr. Fildew was a man who rarely shook hands with any one. His reasons for making an exception in favor of the young law-writer may be told in a few words. One evening, about a year anterior to the particular evening to which we have now come, Mr. Denzil had made his appearance at the Brown Bear considerably the worse for liquor. At the moment of his entrance Mr. Fildew was explaining to the company the ceremonial in connection with a royal levée at St. James's. "What can a shabby dog like you know about the interior of a palace?" hiccoughed Denzil. "If you have ever been inside St. James's it must have been when you were sent for to sweep the chimneys."

"Silence, you drunken fool," said Mr. Fildew, in quietly contemptuous tones.

But Denzil was not in a mood to be silenced, and

would probably have insulted the company all round had not three or four of his more intimate friends removed him as quietly as possible. After that evening he and Mr. Fildew spoke to each other no more.

Six or seven months had passed away when one evening somebody inquired what had become of Denzil, upwards of a week having gone by since his last appearance at the B. B.

"My potman told me to-day that he had heard he was queer," remarked the landlord.

"What's the matter with him? Not d. t. again, eh?"

"Some sort of fever, I'm afraid. Catching, too, I hear."

"Poor Denzil! Let us hope he'll not want for good nursing."

"How can he have good nursing," said another, "when, as I happen to know, he hasn't a single relation within a hundred miles of London? He rents a back bedroom on a third floor, and gets his meals out. That's the sort of home Denzil has."

"Poor devil! They ought to have taken him to the hospital. He'd have been properly cared for there."

"They say he's too ill to be moved," remarked the landlord, as he placidly puffed at his pipe. Had the health of his favorite terrier been in question, some show of feeling might naturally have been expected from him.

Then Mr. Fildew spoke. "Gentlemen," he said, "my opinion is that a deputation of the present com-

pany ought without delay to inquire into the circumstances attendant on Mr. Denzil's illness, and make such arrangements as may be necessary for having him properly cared for."

There was a dead silence in the room. Everybody puffed away with increased energy at their pipes.

Mr. Pyecroft, the small-ware dealer, a thin man with a squeaky voice, was the first to speak. "Did you say the fever was a catching one, Mr. Landlord?"

"So my potman was given to understand. A bad kind of fever—very."

"Humph! Well, I for one, as a family man, must say," resumed Pyecroft, "that much as I respect our friend Denzil, and sincerely as I hope he'll soon be among us again as jovial as ever, I don't see my way to go and inquire personally after his health. My duty to my wife and children tells me that I ought to take the greatest possible care of my own health, for their sakes, if not for my own."

"Hear, hear! my sentiments exactly," resounded from three or four parts of the room. "Number Two is all very well when Number One has been properly cared for."

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Scoop, the tailor, with a doleful shake of the head, "I am afraid that this is one of those unfortunate cases in which friendship finds itself with its hands tied. I don't really see that we can do anything. James, another go of Scotch with an extra squeeze of lemon this time."

Mr. Fildew rose to his feet and put his hat on.

"Surely your grace is not going already?" said Mr. Nutt.

“Why, the evening’s quite a baby yet,” remarked jovial-faced little Tubbins, the undertaker. “But perhaps there’s a lady in the case, eh? Ah, sly dog, sly dog!” and he gave a comprehensive wink for the benefit of the company at large.

“Gentlemen,” said Mr. Fildew, gravely, “I am going to the lodgings of Mr. Denzil. If any one here chooses to accompany me, so much the better. If not, I shall go alone.”

He waited a moment, but no one spoke or moved.

Then he turned on his heel and walked slowly out.

He found Denzil in a raging fever, with no one to attend to him but a poor lad who slept in the next room. For ten days and as many nights he and this lad took it in turns to nurse the sick man, until the fever left him and he was on the high-road to recovery. Then an old aunt was telegraphed for out of Devonshire, and Mr. Fildew went his way. And that is the reason why ever afterwards he and Denzil shook hands when they met each other at the B. B.

To-night the coffee-room was more lively than usual, for Mr. Wimbush, the funny man of the company, had advanced the humorous proposition that the moment a prime-minister failed to secure a majority in the House he ought to be decapitated, and was putting it to his friends generally which of them would like to take office under such circumstances. Lumbering witticisms and time-honored jokes were being bandied about; a joke was hardly looked upon as a joke at the B. B. till it had done duty some half-

dozen times, and came to be recognized as an old friend. But John Fildew sat as grave as a judge, behind his pipe, and took no part in the merriment around him.

By and by in came Mr. Nipper, the auctioneer, with the evening paper in his hand. He sat down next Mr. Fildew, rubbed up his hair, and selected a pipe. "Any news this evening worth reading?" asked Fildew, more for the sake of saying something than because he cared to know what the news might be.

"No, everything seems very stale just now," said the auctioneer, as he blew down the stem of his pipe, and twisted his little finger appreciatively round the inside of the bowl. "There's an account of a fatal accident to one of our young swells; but the country could spare a lot like him without being any the worse off," added Nipper, who prided himself on his democratic principles.

"There are swells and swells," responded Mr. Fildew, dryly. "What was the name of this particular one?"

"The Earl of Loughton. Pitched off his hunter and broke his neck. Not quite one-and-twenty."

Mr. Fildew, who had been in the act of lifting his glass to his lips, put it down untasted. Mr. Nipper turned and stared at him.

"Hullo! I say, what's the matter? Was the young lord a friend of your grace?" This was asked with something of a grin. "By Jove! you are all of a shake."

"The Earl of Loughton was no friend of mine.

I never saw him in my life. But I happen to be acquainted with the man who will succeed him in the title."

"Bully for you, my boy," responded Mr. Nipper, who could not forget that he had once spent six months in the States. "Here's the account. Perhaps you would like to read it." He pointed to a brief paragraph, which Fildew, with the newspaper held up within an inch or two of his nose, read carefully through more than once.

"I must write to my friend to-night and congratulate him," he said, in his usual quiet, matter-of-fact tone, as he laid down the newspaper. "It will be a great surprise for him."

"Let us hope that in the day of his prosperity the friends of his adversity will not be forgotten," said Nipper, who was one of the orators of the B. B.

"It is but a barren honor that he will come into," answered Fildew. "The title will be his, but the estates go elsewhere;" and nodding a curt "good-night" to the auctioneer, he emptied his glass and left the room.

CHAPTER III.

NEGOTIATIONS.

WHETHER Mr. Fildew ever wrote that particular letter respecting which he spoke to Mr. Nipper is more than doubtful. Like many other men, he hated letter-writing, and it is possible that the incident in connection with Lord Loughton, to which he had seemed to attach so much importance when he first heard of it, may have assumed a different aspect when recalled to mind in the cool light of morning. In any case, there was no observable difference in his appearance or mode of life. He came and went, and smoked and drank, as heretofore; only it might be that he was a little more particular in scanning the newspapers than he had previously been. At the end of a week his friend Nipper said to him, "I see that poor young fellow was buried yesterday."

"You mean Lord Loughton? Yes, I saw the account in this morning's paper."

"Written to your friend yet?"

"No. On second thoughts it seemed to me that it would be better to wait a few weeks before troubling him. He'll have enough to do and plenty to think of for a little while."

"Well, I wouldn't lose sight of him if I were you. It must be rather nice to be on nodding terms with an earl. Not that I should care about that sort of

thing, you know," added Nipper, hastily. He had forgotten for the moment that he was in the habit of posing as a democrat. "And then" — with a glance at Fildew's threadbare coat and patched boots — "he might do something for you, you know: some snug little government sinecure, or something of that kind. There's lots of 'em knocking about."

Mr. Fildew laughed a little bitterly. "It may be all very well for me not to forget him, but he may not choose to remember me."

"Well, that's the way of the world and no mistake," said the auctioneer, with a shrug. "But, for all that, I shouldn't forget to jog his memory. Where's the use of having swell friends if you can't make use of 'em?"

A few evenings later Mr. Fildew called for pen, ink, and paper, and, seating himself at a little table, apart from the rest of the company, he wrote the following letter, which George the potman afterwards took for him to the nearest post:

"The Brown Bear Tavern, Chalcot Street, W.C.

"*February 25th, 18—.*

"Messrs. Flicker & Tapp, Bedford Row :

"GENTLEMEN,—In common with a great number of other people, I have heard with extreme regret of the untimely demise of the late Earl of Loughton. That a life so abounding in promise should be thus suddenly nipped in the bud must be almost enough to cause those near and dear to him to arraign the decrees of Providence.

"I know not whether it may be a matter of any moment either to the Dowager Countess of Loughton or to yourselves, as business agents for the family, to be made acquainted with the whereabouts of the present earl; but should it be so, I think I may safely say that I am the only person in England who can

furnish you with his address. You may probably be aware that Mr. Lorrimore, as we may still call him, has resided abroad for several years; but as I happen to have had a communication from him only a fortnight ago, I am fully competent to supply you with the information stated above. Should you think it worth your while to take any notice of this communication, I am to be found here any evening from 8.30 till 11.30 P.M.

“I am, gentlemen, faithfully yours,

“JOHN FILDEW.”

Two evenings passed away without any response, but on the third evening a dapper little man, with a very shiny hat and a pair of whiskers several sizes too large for him, walked into the bar of the Brown Bear, and asked for Mr. Fildew. Our friend, being called, came lounging out of the coffee-room, his glass in his eye and a thumb in each waistcoat pocket.

“Are you Mr. John Fildew?” asked the little stranger, taking in the whole of John’s shabby tog-gery at a glance.

“I am—unfortunately. I often think it would be a good thing if I could be somebody else.”

“My name is Perkins. I have called respecting a certain letter addressed by you to Messrs. Flicker & Tapp. Our senior partner would like to know—”

“Pardon me,” interrupted Fildew, blandly, “but if I have not the pleasure of addressing either Mr. Flicker or Mr. Tapp, we need not proceed further with the matter.”

“Why, sir—how, sir—I don’t understand you!” spluttered Mr. Perkins, becoming as red as a turkey-cock.

“I am sorry for that. I will put my meaning as

plainly as possible. I never transact business except with principals."

"But I tell you, sir, I have been sent here specially to—to—"

"I am sorry that you should have your trouble for nothing, but unless Mr. Flicker or Mr. Tapp choose to come and consult me in person the matter must end here. And, really, I shall not be sorry for it to do so."

"Mr. Flicker or Mr. Tapp come to a place like this!"

"Why not, my dear Mr. Perkins? If the place is good enough for me, surely it is good enough for them."

"Why, you impertinent, shabby—"

"Gently, my dear Mr. Perkins, gently. I've rather a partiality for little men, so long as they behave themselves; but when little men become impertinent I've a nasty trick of caning them (*verbum sap.*). But have a drop of something hot before you go. This house has a name for its old Jamaica, and I've an odd sixpence somewhere in a corner of my pocket."

"To the devil with your Jamaica and your sixpence too!" ejaculated Mr. Perkins. "It's my opinion that you're nothing better than a common swindler;" and, jamming his hat over his brows, the little man turned abruptly on his heel and left the bar. Mr. Fildew, after a grim, silent laugh, went back to his pipe in the coffee-room.

Three days later Mr. Fildew found a note awaiting his arrival at the Brown Bear. It ran as follows:

“No. 429 Bedford Row.

“Messrs. Flicker & Tapp will be at liberty to see Mr. John Fildew any morning between half-past ten and two, if he will favor them with a call as above.”

To this the following answer was sent :

“The Brown Bear Tavern.

“Mr. Fildew is sorry to say that his numerous engagements preclude him from having the pleasure of waiting on Messrs. Flicker & Tapp, as suggested in their note of yesterday. As previously stated, Mr. Fildew may be found at the above address any evening prior to 11.30 P.M.”

“They shall wait upon me, not I upon them,” said Mr. Fildew to himself, with an emphatic bang of his fist upon the unoffending postage-stamp.

And so it came to pass ; for one evening the great Mr. Flicker himself put in an appearance at the Brown Bear, having left his brougham at the corner of the street. He was a tall, thin, melancholy-looking man, like an attenuated life-guardsman who had turned mute for a livelihood. He stood among the bar-frequenters for a moment or two while Mr. Fildew was summoned, looking as grim, cold, and uncompromising as if he had been carved out of monumental marble.

“I am Mr. Flicker.”

“I am Mr. Fildew.”

Then the latter said a few words to the landlord, and the two gentlemen were ushered up-stairs into a private room. As soon as the door was shut, said the lawyer : “We received rather a singular communication from you a few days ago, Mr. Fildew.”

“In what did the singularity of my communication consist, Mr. Flicker ?”

"I will be frank with you, and I trust you will be equally frank with me."

Mr. Fildew bowed, but said nothing.

"May I be permitted to ask by what reasons you were influenced in your assumption that a knowledge of the address of—of—"

"Of the present Earl of Loughton," suggested Mr. Fildew, blandly.

"That a knowledge of the address of the person named in your letter," said Mr. Flicker, loftily, "could be of any possible interest either to the Dowager Lady Loughton or to myself or partner?"

"Were I so minded, I might content myself by replying that the fact of your presence here this evening is a proof that the information proffered by me has a certain measure of interest for you, and possibly for her ladyship also. But you have asked me to deal frankly with you, and I will endeavor to do so. Since writing my first letter to you, I have had a communication from his lordship containing certain instructions, and giving me full power to act in his behalf in this matter."

Mr. Flicker's eyebrows went up perceptibly, but he simply bowed and waited to hear more.

"Before proceeding further," resumed Mr. Fildew, "it may be as well if I give you our view of the case as it now stands. Of course we are all aware that the title, as it comes to the present earl, is what may be called a barren honor, there being no entail. Not one golden guinea, not one acre of moorland, comes with it. The father of the late earl, when he drew up his will, might have foreseen the contin-

gency which the strange irony of events—all unlikely as it then seemed—has now brought about. He took every possible precaution that his scapegrace cousin, the man who, on account of his evil doings, had been compelled to expatriate himself long years before, should not inherit a single rood of the property, and he would doubtless have willed the title away also had it been in his power to do so. The greater share of the property comes to Miss Collumpton, and a lesser share to Mr. Slingsby Boscombe, both of whom are half-cousins to the late earl, and I believe it has long been considered a desirable thing in the Lorrimore family that the two young people in question should unite their fortunes in wedlock. Should this consummation be brought about, one thing and one only would be needed to make such a union a matter for rejoicing among gods and men. The one thing needful would be that the title should accompany the estates.” Mr. Fildew paused for a moment to relight the pipe he had brought with him from the coffee-room. “Which is your favorite tobacco, Mr. Flicker?” he asked, as he blew a cloud of smoke from his lips. “For my part, give me bird’s-eye for choice.”

“I never use tobacco in any shape, sir,” said Mr. Flicker, with a sort of lofty scorn.

“Then let me tell you, sir, that you lose one of the pleasures of existence. But to return to our muttons. As you and I are well aware, Mr. Flicker, under present circumstances the title cannot go with the estates; but it may follow them, and that at no distant date. The life of one elderly gentleman—of

a gentleman who has been in infirm health for years—is all that now stands between Mr. Slingsby Boscombe and an earldom. But supposing this same elderly gentleman were to marry and have issue, where would Mr. Boscombe's chance be in that case?" Mr. Fildew put up his glass and stared across at his companion as if awaiting a reply; but Mr. Flicker merely blew his nose with a melancholy air, and said nothing.

"However, as I am instructed," resumed Mr. Fildew, "matrimony is the last thought in his lordship's mind. At the same time, he does not relish the idea of succeeding to the title without any income to support it with. What, therefore, I am empowered to suggest is a compromise. Provided his lordship will enter into an engagement not to contract a matrimonial alliance, the question is what amount per annum the dowager countess, or Miss Collumpton, or Mr. Slingsby Boscombe, or all three of them together, will be prepared, after due consideration, to allow him out of the estate."

Mr. Fildew let his eye-glass drop and resumed smoking.

Mr. Flicker sat and stared at him across the table. His respect for the strange, shabby, tobacco-flavored man before him had gone up thirty per cent. during the last few minutes.

"Well, Mr. Fildew, really I am at a loss to know in what light to regard the strange proposition you have put before me. I have no instructions to—to—"

"I can't quite understand that," broke in Fildew, "and I am not such an ass as to expect an answer

from you off-hand. Take my proposition away with you, and you and the dowager can consider it at your leisure. You know by this time where I am to be found."

Mr. Flicker rose. His sluggish blood was beginning to simmer. He felt that he had been quietly put down all through the interview. The strange being before him had actually had the presumption to address him in the same tone that he himself might have made use of when speaking to one of his clerks.

"By-the-bye, there is one point that I must press specially on your attention," resumed Fildew, as he too rose. "His lordship informs me that the first step in the negotiations, should your side agree to negotiate at all, must be a distinct understanding that the debts, on account of which he left England so many years ago, shall be discharged in full. His lordship makes that a *sine quâ non*."

"If his lordship may be judged by the tone of his mouthpiece," said Mr. Flicker, dryly, "it seems pretty evident that he looks upon himself as master of the situation."

"It is quite possible that such may be the earl's own opinion. But, in any case, Mr. Flicker, I think that you and I understand each other by this time."

Mr. Flicker muttered something that was inaudible and opened the door. "One moment, if you please," said Mr. Fildew. Then he rang the bell. "James, be good enough to light this gentleman down-stairs and conduct him through the bar."

Four days later the following letter was put into

Mr. Fildew's hands: "If Mr. Fildew will call at No. 287 Harley Street, at noon to-morrow (Tuesday), the Dowager Countess of Loughton will be at home."

Never had John Fildew looked more uncompromisingly and audaciously shabby than when he knocked at 287 Harley Street. His hat and coat might not have been brushed for days. His boots seemed to lack something of their usual polish. He wore a frayed black satin stock with long ends, which completely hid whatever portion of his shirt-front might otherwise have been visible, but which, at the same time, gave one the idea that perhaps there was nothing to hide. A faint, a very faint, aroma of stale tobacco floated round him as he moved.

The bleak March winds had made the ridge of his nose look more purple than usual, and when he put a dingy piece of pasteboard into the hand of the tall footman who answered his knock, that functionary was evidently disposed to look upon him as a member of the great fraternity of shabby-genteel beggars.

"Take that to the Countess of Loughton, and be quick about it," said Mr. Fildew, in the sharp military way he sometimes affected, for the man was turning the card over and hesitating.

Three minutes later Mr. Fildew found himself in the presence of the countess and Mr. Flicker.

The Dowager Lady Loughton was nearly eighty years old, but was still a wonderfully active and bright-eyed little woman. The tradition ran that she had been accounted a great beauty in her youth, but her nose and chin nearly touched each other now, and when she grew very earnest in conversation her

head began to nod as if to add emphasis to her words, but that was simply because she could not keep it still at such times. All her life she had borne the reputation of being a good hater, and it was said that her tongue grew more venomous each year that she lived. The sudden death of her grandson had doubtless been a great blow to her, but she bore the loss with a stoicism which would not let any signs of grief be witnessed by those about her. Some of the countess's dearest friends averred that her grief at the fact of the title having to lapse into another branch of the family was quite as poignant as that which she felt for the loss of the young earl; but then we all know what strange things our dearest friends will say about us.

The countess examined Mr. Fildew through her double eye-glass—even at seventy-eight she would not take to spectacles—as he crossed the room after the servant had shut the door behind him. Mr. Flicker's description of the man had made her slightly curious respecting him. In that elegantly furnished room John Fildew's shabbiness looked shabbier by contrast. Had he been dressed as an ordinary working man he would not have looked nearly so much out of place as he did in the worn and rusty garments of a broken-down man about town. The only change in his attire that he had made in honor of the occasion consisted of a pair of very ancient black-kid gloves, which had been stitched and restitched so often that nothing more could be done for them, and a narrow mourning band round his hat.

"You are Mr. Fildew?" asked the countess, with a sort of sweet condescension in her tones.

"And you are the Dowager Lady Loughton."

Her ladyship looked at Mr. Flicker as much as to say, "You were quite right; a strange being, truly." Then she said aloud, "Pray take a chair, Mr. Fildew."

This Mr. Fildew did, planting himself close to the little table near which the countess and the lawyer were seated. Then he stared mildly through his glass at one and the other of them, as waiting to hear more.

"Mr. Flicker has confided to me the purport of his interview with you a few evenings ago," began the countess.

"And the decision which her ladyship has arrived at," croaked Mr. Flicker, "is that the suggestion then put forward by you is totally inadmissible, and cannot be entertained for a moment."

"Then may I ask," said Mr. Fildew, with a sort of grave surprise, "why I have been summoned to Harley Street this morning? All this might surely have been told me under cover of a penny postage-stamp."

"Although I cannot at present see my way to entertain the proposition which Mr. Lorrimore has thought fit to make through you," said the countess, "it may still be conceded that I am not without a little natural curiosity to learn some particulars concerning the man himself, and what he has been doing these many years since he left England."

"I have no authority to gratify your ladyship's

curiosity. I am here simply to negotiate a certain business transaction. As there seems no probability of our coming to terms I may as well take my leave at once. When Lord Loughton arrives in England he will no doubt be able to satisfy your ladyship's affectionate inquiries: whether he will care to do so is another matter." Mr. Fildew rose and pushed back his chair.

"Sit down, sir," said her ladyship, with an imperious gesture. "If you were Lord Loughton himself you could not treat me more cavalierly." Her head began to nod portentously.

"Suppose I am Lord Loughton?" said Mr. Fildew, quietly, as he resumed his seat.

"Eh!" said her ladyship, with a sudden scared look.

"I say—suppose I am Lord Loughton?"

She stuck her double eyeglass across her nose and stared at him for a moment or two. "You Lord Loughton—you!" she said, with a little derisive cackle. "Tchut! tchut! that would be a farce indeed."

"A farce that, like many others in real life, may involve a most serious meaning. But whether it be a farce or a masquerade, it is high time it were ended. Permit me, therefore, to introduce myself to your ladyship as John Marmaduke Lorrimore, ninth Earl of Loughton."

CHAPTER IV.

TERMS PROPOSED.

"I DON'T believe one word you have said. You are nothing but a vile impostor," exclaimed Lady Loughton, with all the energy at her command, while her head continued to wag as if at any moment it might fall off.

Mr. Flicker rose from his chair, and, with his hands resting on the table, stared across at the audacious being sitting opposite to him. His mouth opened and then shut. Finding no language forcible enough to express a tithe of what he felt, he sat down again without speaking, and blew his nose. It was a protest more eloquent than words.

"Your ladyship always had a reputation for speaking your mind. I find that the old habit still clings to you," said Mr. Fildew, quietly, as he toyed carelessly with a paper-knife.

"You are nothing but a charlatan, sir, and my servants shall turn you out of doors." Her ladyship laid a finger on the tiny silver gong at her elbow, but Mr. Fildew's next words arrested the movement.

"I remember on one occasion when I was at Ringwood," he said, "and I could not have been more than eight or nine years old at the time, what a

scrape Cousin Charley and I got into through bird-nesting in the woods when we ought to have been learning our lessons. We were stealing in through the back entrance, as black as two sweeps, when your ladyship caught us. What a setting down you gave us, to be sure! Charley being Earl of Loughton—he came into the title, you know, when he was seven years old—was simply scolded and forgiven, while I, being merely cousin to the Earl of Loughton, and nobody in particular, was not only scolded but sent with your ladyship's compliments to Mr. Pembroke, the tutor, and would he please cane me enough for two. The sight of you again, madam, brought this little reminiscence quite freshly to my mind."

Snarling till she showed the whole of her false teeth, and shaking a withered finger at Mr. Fildew, the countess said, "I repeat, sir, that you are nothing but a charlatan. Don't for one moment imagine that you can bamboozle me with any made-up tales about Ringwood, and what happened there thirty or forty years ago. Any fool could work up evidence of that kind."

"There used to be a good deal of company at the old place in those days," resumed Mr. Fildew, without heeding her ladyship's outburst in the least. "Where are the old faces by this time, I wonder? Scattered to the four quarters of the globe, I suppose, such of them as are still alive. Does your ladyship remember Captain Bristow? I wonder whether he is still among the living."

It was strange to see the hot color mount to her ladyship's forehead. She blushed like any girl of

eighteen. Then she took up her fan. "Mr. Flicker," she said, "will you oblige me by opening that window a couple of inches? I feel a little faint. Thank you. And now, sir," turning to Mr. Fildew, "pray what do you know about Captain Bristow?"

"I have some very pleasant reminiscences in connection with the handsome captain. For one thing, he always tipped me liberally when he came to Ringwood. One day I happened to be the unseen witness of a little comedietta in which your ladyship and the captain enacted the chief—indeed, I may say, the only characters. I had been to the library to fetch a book for Mr. Pembroke, when, happening to hear voices in the blue boudoir, which, as you may remember, madam, is the room next the library, and perceiving that the door was ajar, I peeped in and saw—now, what does your ladyship think that I saw?"

The countess coughed, and Mr. Flicker, in obedience to an almost imperceptible sign, rose softly from his chair and walked away to the farthest window, humming under his breath.

"I saw," resumed Mr. Fildew, with hardly a break, "the captain on his knees before your ladyship—the earl had been dead at that time about two years—I saw him kiss your hand, and I saw that you, madam, did not repulse him. I was not near enough to hear the words which passed between you, but presently I saw the captain take a ring out of his waistcoat pocket and slip it on to your ladyship's finger. Then there came a knock at the other door, and the captain had barely time to rise before in came a servant with a letter for him. It was a message to say that his

father was dying. He left Ringwood that night, and never, so far as I know, entered its doors again. But I notice that your ladyship still wears the ring which Captain Bristow slipped on your finger that sunny afternoon. That is the one on the third finger of your right hand."

Lady Loughton sank back in her easy-chair, and turned as white as she had been red before. "Water," she said, faintly, pointing to a carafe that stood upon a side-table. Mr. Flicker was by her side in a moment. When she had drunk a little water, he said, "Shall I ring the bell for your maid?"

"No. I shall be better presently. I hate having a fuss made about trifles." Then, after a moment or two of silent thought, she said suddenly, "Flicker, that man"—pointing to Mr. Fildew with her fan—"is either John Marmaduke Lorrimore or Beelzebub!"

Mr. Flicker rubbed his chilly hands together and bowed low—very low. Whether the bow was intended for the Earl of Loughton or for the Prince of Darkness was best known to himself.

"I am sorry, my lord," he said, "that with a recent melancholy tragedy still fresh in my memory, I cannot congratulate your lordship as I should like to have done on your accession to so distinguished a title."

"You are not a bit like a Lorrimore," broke in her ladyship, in the abrupt way which was habitual with her.

"And yet you used to say that I had more of a Lorrimore look than even your own son had."

"It seems impossible that you can ever have been that long-haired, fair-skinned boy whom I used to nurse and spoil."

"And box and scold—don't forget that, madam. I have fought with wild beasts at Ephesus since those days, and there's little left of me but a wreck."

"What are your means of living?"

"I have a private income of one pound per week."

"And you exist on that?"

"On that I exist."

This statement, if not strictly in accordance with fact, was still sufficiently near the truth. The countess and Mr. Flicker exchanged looks.

"And now, sir, if you are prepared to state categorically to Mr. Flicker and myself what it is that you think we ought to do for you, we will listen to what you may have to say." The dowager was careful not to address him by his title, although she had virtually acknowledged his right to it.

"What I think you ought to do is this," said the earl, with quiet deliberation. "In the first place, to pay my debts, amounting, with interest, to a trifle over six thousand pounds; and, in the second place, to allow me twelve hundred a year for life, to be paid quarterly in advance."

"Tut-tut-tut!" said the countess. "The man must be mad—crazy. Six thousand pounds down and twelve hundred a year for life! Where do you imagine, sir, that any such outrageous sums are to be obtained from?"

“When Charles came of age I remember that his income was set down as being a clear eighteen thousand a year, and I don’t suppose the estate has depreciated in value since that time.”

“My life interest in the estate, let me tell you, sir, is only to the extent of three thousand per annum.”

“Of that, madam, I am quite aware. But there are other people interested in this question besides yourself. Your niece, Miss Collumpton, for instance, and Mr. Slingsby Boscombe, who hopes to be Earl of Loughton whenever Providence may be pleased to snuff me out of existence.”

“And pray what are the special advantages that might be supposed to accrue to the family in general, supposing, for the sake of argument merely, that they were disposed to entertain your ridiculous proposition?”

“The advantages are self-evident. The family surely do not wish to see an honorable and ancient title dragged through the mire at the heels of a pauper, and what am I but a pauper? Then, again, I am not a marrying man. I don’t want to marry. Miss Collumpton and Mr. Boscombe may become man and wife with the blissful certainty that the title will be theirs in ten or a dozen years at the most—it may be in ten or a dozen months.”

“Suppose, on the other hand, that we decline *in toto* to have anything to say to your proposition?”

“In that case, madam, my course lies clear before me. I cannot, as an earl, be expected to exist on a pound a week; that would be too absurd. I have the honor to rent an apartment over a milk-shop in

one of our most populous suburbs. My landlady has one daughter — a buxom, apple-cheeked, red-armed young woman of five-and-twenty, who serves in the shop. I should make this estimable young person Countess of Loughton. For I am growing old, madam, and feel to need the comforts of a home, and what is twenty shillings a week for a nobleman to live on? I have reason to believe that the milk business is a lucrative one, and, with an earl at the head of it, it would become ten times more lucrative than it is now. Of course, I should have my name in full over the door: ‘John Marmaduke Lorrimore, Earl of Loughton.’ And the same on our business cards, with the family escutcheon underneath, and the family motto *Je puis*. Then would follow the usual announcements: ‘New milk twice a day. Pure Aylesbury butter. Our eggs, eight a shilling, are guaranteed by the Countess. References kindly permitted to the Dowager Lady Loughton, No. 287 Harley street, and to Mr. Flicker, of the eminent firm of Flicker & Tapp. The earl will be on view in the shop any day from ten till eleven A. M., engaged in the perusal of the *Morning Post*.’ I should send out circulars and cards to every name enshrined in Debrett. Twelve hundred a year, madam, would not cover the profits of such a concern. And, by and by, I should hope to have a son and heir to inherit his father’s title and his mother’s business.”

His lordship, for so we must henceforth call him, stared gravely across the table at Lady Loughton. For a little time no sound was heard save the obtrusive ticking of Mr. Flicker’s watch.

"Do you think, sir, you are altogether in your right senses?" asked the countess at length, turning on him in her quick way.

"Well, really, Aunt Barbara"—she winced at the appellation—"I have sometimes asked myself the same question. I have a theory that we are all more or less mad on some point or other, and probably I am neither better nor worse than the majority of my fellows."

"You can go now, sir," said the countess, presently. "I have seen enough of you for one day—more than enough. Should I care to see you again I will send for you."

"Flicker knows where a letter will always find me," said the earl, with easy condescension, as he pushed back his chair and possessed himself of his dilapidated hat. "You will think over what I have said, Aunt Barbara, will you not? As I remarked before, I am not a marrying man, and really, to go into the milk trade would be rather below the dignity of an earl, would it not?" He was rubbing his hat tenderly with the sleeve of his threadbare coat as he spoke.

"Go! go!" was all that the countess could say, as she pointed with a skinny finger to the door.

"I have the honor, madam, to wish you a very good morning," said the earl, bowing low over his hat. "Flicker, I shall, doubtless, see you again before long."

Lord Loughton walked slowly down the broad staircase, under the eyes of the two tall footmen in the hall. But scarcely had he reached the lowest

stair before Mr. Flicker called over the balusters in his most dulcet tones, "My lord—my lord—you have left your pocket-handkerchief behind you." Had some one fired off a gun close by the heads of the two footmen they could not have been more startled.

"Did you not hear, sir?" said the earl, sharply, to one of them. "Fetch me my pocket-handkerchief, and be quick about it."

The man had never climbed those stairs so quickly before. A minute had hardly elapsed before he came down again, carrying a silver salver on which lay his lordship's well-worn green-and-red bandana. The earl took his handkerchief off the salver with the gravest air in the world, and replaced it in his pocket. Then the massive door was flung wide open, and he marched slowly forth into the street. Stopping at the first tavern he came to, and pushing open the swing-doors, he went in and called for four-penny-worth of brandy-and-water and a mild cheroot.

CHAPTER V.

TERMS ACCEPTED.

A FORTNIGHT passed after Lord Loughton's interview with the dowager countess before he received any further communication from her. During that time life went on with him in its ordinary humdrum fashion. No one either saw or suspected any difference in him. If the misfortunes and mishaps of his earlier life had taught him nothing else, they had at least taught him the virtue of patience. He was emphatically a man who could bide his time.

But at the end of a fortnight there came a note addressed to Mr. Fildew, at the Brown Bear, in which he was informed that the countess would see him at the Charing Cross Hotel at eleven o'clock next morning. He smiled grimly to himself as he read. "We are ashamed of our shabby relation, it seems," he muttered. "We don't want him to call again in Harley Street till he is a little more presentable."

But he was not one whit more presentable when he was ushered into her ladyship's room next morning. "A more deplorable object than ever," were her ladyship's words afterwards to Mr. Flicker. The ends of two fingers had burst completely through his gloves and refused to be hidden any longer, while the

shiny patch on one side of his hat was certainly growing in circumference from day to day. It is quite possible that he had some ulterior object to serve in thus appearing at his shabbiest before the countess.

He walked across the room rather more briskly than usual, and when he reached the countess he put out his hand. But her ladyship made believe not to see it, and motioned him to a chair. He took it, not in the slightest degree abashed by her refusal to shake hands with him. The inevitable Mr. Flicker was seated close by, as monumentally cold and as mutely observant as ever.

Her ladyship's first remark was a somewhat singular one. "Mr. Flicker," she said, "will you oblige me by looking behind the left ear of—of the person opposite to me, just at the back of the lobe, and tell me whether you find a large mole there?"

Mr. Flicker rose from his seat, coughed deferentially, adjusted his double eye-glass on his nose, and walked gingerly across the floor to where Lord Loughton was sitting. "Pardon me," he said in his blandest tones; "it is at her ladyship's special request that I do this."

The earl smiled, or it may be he only sneered—one could not always feel sure which was intended—but said nothing. Bending his head slightly forward, he lifted up the tangled masses of his iron-gray hair with one hand and pulled at the lobe of his ear with the other, so as to assist Mr. Flicker in his search for the birth-mark.

That gentleman, with his hands behind his coat-tails, bent his head and peered through his glasses as

though he were trying to decipher some half-illegible inscription. "Nothing to be seen, I suppose, is there?" asked the dowager at last, drumming impatiently on the table with her fingers meanwhile.

"Pardon me, madam, but there is certainly a very large mole here, just behind the lobe of the left ear," replied Flicker, in his slow, precise way.

"There is, eh? A mole. You are quite sure?"

"Quite sure, Lady Loughton. There can be no mistake in the matter, I give you my word of honor. A very fine mole, indeed."

Her ladyship sighed. "Ah, well, then," she said, after a moment's silence, "I suppose we must really put him down as being the Earl of Loughton."

"I thought that point was finally settled when I saw your ladyship last," said the earl.

"Then it shows, sir, how little you know about it. Nothing is finally settled in this world, except that there are a vast number of rogues and vagabonds in it."

"It would not be half such a diverting place without them," said the earl, with a chuckle. Mr. Flicker shook his head in his slow, melancholy way, but did not speak. Such doctrines were dreadful to listen to, especially when enunciated by a peer of the realm.

Her ladyship was staring intently at the fire. After a while she said, without turning round, "The strange proposition which you chose to lay before me when I saw you last has been received with more consideration than it deserved. It has been decided by my advisers, conjointly with the advisers of Miss Collumpton and Mr. Slingsby Boscombe, in the first

place, to pay off the debts contracted by you some thirty years ago, after receiving from you a full and correct schedule of the same; and, in the second place, to allow you an income of six hundred pounds per annum so long as you continue to remain unmarried; and I must say that I consider the offer a most munificent one."

"Oh, yes, most munificent!" sneered the earl. "Six hundred a year out of eighteen thousand; yes, certainly, most munificent."

"Do you, or do you not, agree to the terms?"

"Beggars cannot be choosers, madam; and, as I have said more than once already, I am not a marrying man."

"Mr. Flicker will settle all details with you." Mr. Flicker rubbed his hands and bowed. "You will, of course, sign an undertaking not to marry so long as the income is continued to you."

"Pardon me, madam, but I must decline to sign any such document. My word of honor must be taken as a sufficient guarantee of my intentions."

"Your word of honor! Pray, how much would that article fetch if it were put up to auction?"

Mr. Flicker crossed the floor and whispered a few words in the countess's ear. "If you really think so, let it be so," she said to him. Then she said to the earl, "As I said before, I will leave you and Flicker to settle details."

"May I presume that your lordship has never been married?" asked the lawyer, in his most insinuating tones. He was looking down and fumbling with some papers on the table before him.

The countess turned her head quickly.

“Never, Flicker, never,” replied the earl, impressively; “on that word of honor which her ladyship believes would fetch so little if put up for sale. I have been very near it, though, once or twice—very near it indeed—but Providence has always intervened.”

Her ladyship turned away in a huff.

There was an interval of silence. Mr. Flicker was engaged in tying up his documents, and the earl was watching him.

“May I ask whether you have formed any plans for the future?” asked the dowager, presently.

“No plans in particular. I think that I shall go and live at Brimley, at least for some time to come.”

“At Brimley! Why, that is only sixteen miles from Ringwood.”

“Precisely so. We shall be neighbors. A dozen miles, more or less, are not of much consequence in the country.”

The countess did not look over well pleased. “What is your object in choosing Brimley for a residence?” she asked.

“I lived near there with my father when a lad, and I still retain some pleasant recollections of it, so that the place will not seem altogether strange to me. In addition to which, I see from an advertisement in to-day’s *Times* that ‘Laurel Cottage’ there is to be let on lease—the very place to suit an elderly bachelor of limited means and unambitious tastes. I shall run down there to-morrow and see about it.”

“Well, sir, I hope that when next I see you I shall

find some improvement in your toilet and general appearance."

"Possibly, madam, possibly. I admit that there is some slight room for alteration, perhaps for improvement. I have not followed the fashions very attentively of late. The state of my finances did not allow of my doing so."

"Mr. Flicker will send you a check to-morrow."

"I shall be greatly obliged to Mr. Flicker."

"What a pity it is that you threw your chances to the dogs in the way you did when a young man."

"What a pity it is that my cousin Charles, your good son, madam, could not see his way to advance me the three thousand pounds which was all I needed at that time to save me from destruction. But he buttoned his breeches pocket—saving your ladyship's presence—and allowed me to go headlong to the deuce."

"You forget, sir, that you had had five hundred pounds from him only six months previously."

"I forget nothing. Three thousand pounds would have been my salvation. I did not have the three thousand pounds, nor three thousand pence, and you see the result before you to-day."

"Charles was building and planting at the time, as I well remember, and the sum was a much larger one than he could spare."

"So the building and the planting went on, and Cousin Jack was obliged to fly like a thief in the night. It was the young fool's own fault, and it was only right that he should suffer. So ridiculous of him, wasn't it, to think that because he and Charley

had been school-fellows and like brothers for years, he could now ask Charley to pull him through his troubles? I've often laughed since to think what a young greenhorn he must have been. I'll warrant you he knows the world better by this time."

The countess's head was beginning to shake worse than ever. Flicker made a sign to the earl, and the latter rose. "Good-morning, Aunt Barbara," he said; "shake hands with me for my mother's sake if you won't for my own."

She stared very hard at him for about half a minute, and then she extended two claw-like fingers. "Get a decent coat to your back before you let me see you again. And—and I don't want to see those gloves any more."

Next day "Mr. Fildew" received from Mr. Flicker a check for one hundred and fifty pounds, being the first quarterly instalment of his allowance at the rate of six hundred pounds a year.

"Greedy old hag!" muttered the earl to himself as he pocketed the check. "She might just as easily have made it twelve hundred as six. I'll be even with her for this before I've done with her."

CHAPTER VI.

MILD LUNACY.

"THIS must be the house, No. 105 Cadogan Place," said Clement Fildew to himself, as he stopped in front of an imposing-looking mansion. Taking the steps two at time, he gave a loud rat-tat-tat at the door. "Is Miss Collumpton at home?" he asked of the man who answered his knock.

Miss Collumpton was at home.

"Will you give her this card, and say that I have called at the request of Sir Percy Jones?"

He was shown into a morning-room while the man took his message. After three or four minutes the door opened, and a young lady entered, dressed very plainly in black. As their eyes met they both started, and then, as if moved by a common impulse, they drew a step or two nearer each other, while Clem colored up to the roots of his hair. The young lady, who was by far the more self-possessed of the two, was the first to speak. "Unless I am much mistaken," she said, "you are the gentleman to whose kindness I was so greatly indebted when coming up to town the other day."

"And you are the lady to whom I had the good-fortune to be of some slight service."

"A slight service, do you call it? It seemed to

me a very great service at the time. I missed you in the confusion at the terminus, so that my aunt was not able to thank you, as she would very much like to have done."

"I certainly can't see that any thanks were needed. But, putting that aside, I am very pleased to have met you again." And as he said this there was a fire and earnestness in his eyes that in its turn brought a vivid blush to the young lady's cheeks. "I came here at the request of Sir Percy Jones," he added, "to see Miss Collumpton respecting a portrait. I never expected to have the pleasure of finding you under the same roof."

"I have been living here for some time," she said. Then to herself she added, "I wonder whom he takes me for—a nursery governess or a companion, or what?"

"I hope Miss Collumpton is not a very exacting young lady. If she is, I am afraid that I shall scarcely be able to please her. I have painted very few portraits as yet, but Sir Percy was so pleased with the one I did of him that he declared he must have one of his god-daughter to take with him when he goes abroad."

"I don't think that you will find Miss Collumpton very exacting."

"I am glad to hear that. I wish it was your portrait I was going to paint instead of hers."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask, "Why do you wish that?" but, happening to glance at his face, she saw the same look in his eyes that had troubled her before. She dropped her lids and looked another

way. There was a moment's awkward silence. Then she said, "I think I had better go and fetch Miss Collumpton. She promised to follow me at once;" and with that she got out of the room.

Left alone, Clem went back at once to his examination of the prints and sketches on the walls. But he saw them without seeing them, and could remember nothing of them afterwards. He had caught Love's fever, and the symptoms were declaring themselves already. He was standing before a little sketch by Stanfield and smiling fatuously, as though there was something comical about it, which there certainly was not. When the patient takes to smiling in this purposeless way it is looked upon by those learned in such matters as a very bad sign.

About a week previously, as he was coming up to town, a young lady—the young lady who had just left the room—got into the same carriage, a second-class one, at Tring, in which he was already seated. He was not aware that she had been driven to take refuge in the second-class on account of the first-class seats being all occupied. They were presently joined by a cad of a fellow, who was evidently half-drunk, and just as evidently determined to talk to the pretty girl on the opposite seat, whether she liked it or not. At length the annoyance reached such a pitch, and the lady became so plainly distressed, that Clem, whose blood had been simmering for some time, felt called upon to interfere. Thereupon the cad turned on our friend like a young bear, and growled out something about wise people minding their own business, adding a certain epithet which had better have been left

unspoken. The result was that before he knew what had happened he found himself lying in a heap in a corner of the carriage, with a discolored eye and a bruised nose, and a feeling as if a fifth of November cracker had exploded in his head. The train was slackening speed at the time, and as soon as it stopped the wounded knight scrambled out of the carriage, holding his handkerchief to his nose and muttering something about fetching the police. But he was seen no more. The rest of the journey came to an end far too soon for Clem. When he alighted at Euston the young lady was at once taken possession of by an elderly lady, while Clem rushed off in search of his portmanteau. But Clem had not forgotten the sweet face of his travelling companion. Being an artist, what more natural than that he should attempt to sketch it from memory as soon as he reached home, and not once but twenty times.

“What do you mean by neglecting your Academy picture in this way?” Tony Macer had fiercely demanded three days later. “And what do you mean, sir, by drawing the same simpering face from morn till dewy eve, and grinning to yourself all the time like a jackass in a fit? You’ve not been idiot enough to go and fall in love, have you? By Apelles! if I thought you had, I would take you *vi et armis*, and hold you under the back-kitchen tap for half an hour, and see whether that wouldn’t cool your foolish brain!”

This threat of Tony must be taken *cum grano*, seeing that he was only about four feet eight inches high and had the arms of a girl of sixteen, whereas

his friend Clem could easily have lifted him up with one hand and have thrown him across the room. But Tony's objurgations did Clem good, and he was fast regaining his interest in mutton-chops, bitter-beer, and the progress of his picture, when the deplorable meeting we have just recorded took place, and all hopes of his convalescence were at once scattered to the winds.

The siren who was the cause of all this commotion in our young painter's heart, having shut the door behind her, ran quickly up-stairs and burst into a tiny boudoir, where another young lady, also dressed in black, was sitting calmly at work.

"Mora! Mora! what do you think? This Mr. Clement Fildew, whom god-papa has sent here to paint my portrait, turns out to be the same gentleman who took my part in the train the other day when that man insulted me so dreadfully. Is it not strange that we should meet again in this way, and so soon afterwards?"

"Very strange, indeed. But such coincidences happen oftener in real life than many people imagine."

"But the strangest part is to come, dear. Mr. Fildew doesn't take me for myself, but for you."

"How can he take you for me, Cecilia, when he and I have never seen each other?"

"I mean that he doesn't take me for Miss Collumpton. He believes me to be somebody else living under the same roof with that paragon."

"But why did you not undeceive him the moment you discovered his mistake?"

"I don't intend to undeceive him just yet, it is such fun to be mistaken for somebody else."

"But you cannot keep him in ignorance much longer. He has come here to take your portrait."

"I'll tell you what I mean to do, Mora—it came into my head while I was talking to him: I mean to introduce you to Mr. Fildew as Cecilia Collumpton and myself as Mora Browne, your companion and friend. He can then take your portrait as well as mine."

Miss Browne's large blue eyes opened wide with astonishment. "Good gracious! Cecilia, what mad-cap scheme will you take into your head next?"

"I don't know what my next scheme will be, but I think this one will be immense fun, and I trust to your friendship to enable me to carry it out."

"Of course you may trust me for anything; you know that quite well. But what will your aunt say, and what, in the name of goodness, will Lady Lough-ton say, should either of them hear of it? They would never forgive me for my share in the deception."

"I don't mean either of them to know anything about it. Surely you and I can keep our little plot to ourselves."

"Your scheme frightens me, I must confess. It seems so terribly audacious."

"In its audacity lies our security. Besides, what is there to be afraid of? You certainly look the heiress more than I do. And for myself, it will be a fresh experience—something altogether novel and de-

lightful—to be talked to and treated, not as a young woman with so many thousands a year, but—but—”

“As her humble friend and companion,” interposed Miss Browne, with the slightest tinge of bitterness in her tone. “As one who esteems herself passing rich on eighty pounds a year.”

“Forgive me, dear,” said Cecilia, contritely. “I had no intention of hurting your feelings.”

“I know it, dear, I know it. Don’t say another word. And now I am at your service, although I am afraid you have hardly considered how foolish we shall both look when we have to face the necessity of an explanation.”

“I don’t at all see why we should look foolish. You may leave me to arrange all that.” Miss Browne shook her head, but offered no further opposition in words.

Cecilia Collumpton had stated no more than the truth when she said that Mora Browne looked far more like an heiress than she did—that is, taking the common idea of what an heiress ought to look like. For Mora was tall, fair, and stately, with large, limpid blue eyes and a wealth of yellow hair. Her figure had the ample proportions of a youthful Juno, but as all her movements seemed timed to slow music, there was no perceptible lack of harmony. She had a cold, clear, incisive voice, and a slight hauteur of manner, which in her case was not affectation, seeing that it was natural to her and not put on. She was the daughter of a rector who had ruined himself and his family by some mad speculations in mining shares. Although she was Cecilia’s dearest friend, and had

known her since girlhood, she would not come to live with her except on the footing of a paid companion, to whom, and by whom, a month's notice could at any time be given. But none the less had Mora an intense detestation of poverty and all its surroundings, and years ago she had made up her mind that if she were ever to marry it should be only to some man of ample fortune, who could afford to keep her as she felt she ought to be kept.

Cecilia Collumpton at this time was just twenty-two years old. She was a brunette, and rather petite in figure. She had a small, classically shaped head, a straight, clear-cut nose, and eyes of the darkest gray, with gleams of opaline light in them whenever she was at all excited. She was quick, vivacious, and emotional, and brimful of spirits and energy. She was easily imposed upon. A tale of distress brought tears to her eyes in a moment, and she never paused to inquire whether it was a reality or a sham before bringing out her purse. She was fond of riding, but loved a wild scamper across the downs far more than a regulation canter in the park. Her aunt called her "undisciplined," and Lady Loughton termed her "a hoyden," while Slingsby Boscombe, in some verses he once addressed to her—the feet of which, truth to tell, halted so wofully that Sir Percy Jones, who happened to come across them one day, gave it as his opinion that they must have been composed by a cripple—wrote of her as his "sweet wild rose," and yet Slingsby had never been in love with her.

Miss Browne, followed by Cecilia, sailed slowly into the room where Clement was waiting. He

broke his reverie with a start, and advanced a few steps to meet them. "You are Mr. Fildew?" said Mora. Clem bowed. "And you have called respecting a portrait which Sir Percy Jones has commissioned you to paint?"

"Yes, Sir Percy asked me to call without delay, as his time in England was now getting very short. I am desirous of knowing on what days and at what hours it will be convenient for you to give me the requisite sittings."

Mora put a finger to her lips, and considered for a moment.

"To-day is Tuesday. Suppose we say Thursday next, at eleven, for the first sitting. We can arrange for future sittings afterwards. Will that suit you, Mr. Fildew?"

"Any time will suit me, madam. On this card you will find the address of my studio."

"I wish you to bear in mind, Mr. Fildew," said Mora, as she took the card, "that there will be two portraits for you to paint."

"Two portraits, Miss Collumpton!"

"Mine and that of my friend, Miss Browne. I have decided that we shall both be taken at the same time and in the same style."

"Oh."

It was a sort of ecstatic sigh drawn from the bottom of his heart—wherever that may have been.

The two girls glanced at each other.

"I had the pleasure of meeting Miss Browne a few days ago," stammered Clement. He felt that he was making a great idiot of himself.

"I have told Miss Collumpton," said Cecilia, "how much I owed to your kindness on that occasion."

"For Mora's sake, Mr. Fildew," said Miss Browne, "I am glad to be able to thank you in person for the service you rendered her. She was coming up to town to stay with me at the time you met her."

"How well she acts her part," said Cecilia, to herself, with an admiring glance at her friend. "And how well she would carry out such a part in real life."

Clem muttered something about the service he had rendered being a very slight one, after which he took a rather hurried leave. He was glad to get out into the cold, wintry afternoon. It seemed to him that he walked home that day as the gods of old are fabled to have walked—on ambient air. Surely those were not the cold, slushy streets of dreary, commonplace London. Everything seemed as if it had been touched by a necromancer's wand.

"Mora." He whispered the word to himself again and again. What a sweet and romantic name it was! He did not venture to say, even to himself, that Mora's surname was either sweet or romantic. But that surname should be changed for another, by and by, or he would know the reason why.

CHAPTER VII.

“SWEET COZ.”

CLEMENT FILDEW had not left Cadogan Place more than half an hour when Mr. Slingsby Boscombe was announced. Slingsby had not seen Cecilia since the funeral of the young Earl of Loughton, which had taken place at Ringwood, the family seat, in Bedfordshire. Slingsby had attended as one of the mourners in chief.

“I don’t think that I was ever in poor Alexander’s company more than five or six times in my life,” said Mr. Boscombe, in answer to a question put by Cecilia. He was a round-faced, boyish-looking young fellow of two-and-twenty, with a tendency to become abnormally stout even at that early age. “The dowager never cared to cultivate our branch of the family over much, and I have often heard my father speak of her in no very friendly terms.”

“I believe that Lady Loughton was always noted for having a temper of her own,” said Miss Collumpton. “I have been told that when her son’s wife was alive—I mean, poor Alic’s mother—she stood so much in awe of the dowager’s temper that she never would see her when the latter called at Ringwood, but used to lock herself up in her own rooms till she was gone.”

“When Alic’s mother died, of course the dowager went back to Ringwood.”

“Yes, and there she has lived ever since, and would, doubtless, have continued to live, but for this terrible accident, till Alic got married, in which case I suppose she would have had to find a home elsewhere.”

“And very proper, too. From what little I have seen of her I should hardly care to live under the same roof with her.”

“And yet she must be nearly eighty years old.”

“And looks likely to live to be a hundred. She is certainly a very wonderful old lady.”

“I used to like her very well when I went to Ringwood as a child, although, of course, I stood in great awe of her. But after that she and Aunt Percival had some words, and I have not seen her for several years. Fortunately I met poor Alic in the Park only three months ago: we had a long talk about old times. How little I thought that I should never see him again!”

There were tears in Cecilia’s eyes, and Slingsby forebore to speak for a minute or two. Then he said, “Do you know, Cis, my father never told me till a week ago what a very large slice of the Loughton property was left to me by Alic’s father in case Alic should die without heirs! I was perfectly astounded. I suppose the governor’s reason for not speaking to me about it before was because he thought the chance of its coming to me seemed so very remote that it was not worth while troubling me about it in any way. But what an absurd pro-

viso is that which precludes me from touching a penny of it till I am twenty-five years old! You can do as you like with your share, although you are four months younger than I, while I shall have to wait another three years for mine. It is really too ridiculous!"

"I suppose that when Uncle Charles drew up his will he had an idea that boys remain boys till they are five-and-twenty, which, indeed, quite a number of them seem to do."

"And meanwhile I have to depend on my father for my income."

"Instead of earning it for yourself, as so many other young men are obliged to do. How thankful you ought to be that you have such a father!"

"As for that, the governor says that I shall have plenty to do by and by in looking after the estates and attending to the property. I am sure that he works as hard as any laborer."

"Then why not take some of his work on to those broad shoulders of yours?"

"Bless you, he won't let me have anything to do with the management of the property. He says it will be time enough for me to think about that when he is gone."

"But you will no longer have to wait for any such mournful contingency. Three years will soon pass away, and then this Loughton property, which will be yours, will find you plenty to do."

"And will make me my own master into the bargain, and that is by no means the most unimportant feature in the case. You will, perhaps, hardly credit

it, Cis, but I never knew till after Alic's death that the estates were not entailed."

"I believe the entail was cut off about eighty years ago."

"And a good thing for you and me that it was cut off! By-the-bye, how is his new lordship supposed to be able to keep up the traditional state and dignity of an Earl of Loughton?"

"I believe it is not at present known where his new lordship is to be found, or even whether he is alive or dead. If he be alive, it is quite possible that he may have means of his own. If it be proved that he is dead, I suppose we shall have to address you, sir, as my lord earl."

"Provided the missing earl has not left a son and heir behind him."

From this it will be seen that the conversation we are now recording took place before that first interview between "Mr. Fildew" and the dowager countess.

Mr. Fildew, senior, was cousin to Charles, the seventh earl, who was father of the young lord recently killed. Mr. Slingsby Boscombe was grandson to the youngest brother of the sixth earl, while Miss Columpton was granddaughter to the only sister of the same nobleman.

"It seems rather strange, doesn't it, Cis," resumed Slingsby, "that Earl Charles should pass over his own cousin, the man who, if he lived, must come into the title in case of Alic dying without heirs, in favor of two such insignificant people as you and I?"

"The missing earl is said to have been very wild and dissipated when young, and to have got at length

into such dreadful difficulties that he was compelled to go abroad. I suppose there was a great scandal about it, and very probably the earl's will was made about the time he felt so much annoyed at his cousin's outrageous conduct."

"And this disgrace to the family has never been heard of since?"

"Not to my knowledge: most probably he is dead."

"Even if he be, the difficulty will be to prove it."

Slingsby, having contemplated this difficulty in silence for a minute or two, said: "Do you know, Cis, that my father has been badgering me again about that old family scheme for making you and me man and wife?"

"And Lady Loughton has been stirring up my aunt about the same thing. They have become friends again since Alic's death."

"I wish they would mind their own business."

"So do I, with all my heart."

"Do you think we care enough for each other, Cis, to marry?"

"I think it very doubtful, Slingsby, whether we do."

"When you are told from youth upward that you must marry one person and no other, you naturally begin to rebel in your secret heart."

"My own feelings exactly."

"You know, Cis, I am very fond of you, and always have been."

"And I of you, Slingsby—in a cousinly sort of way."

"Just so; in a cousinly sort of way. But that's hardly how a husband and wife ought to feel towards each other, is it?"

"I've had no experience either one way or the other, but I should think not."

"Now that we so thoroughly understand each other, may I tell you a secret, Cis?"

"A hundred if you like, Slingsby. Being a woman, I am fond of secrets."

"But, being a woman, can you keep one?"

"I'll try. I daren't say more than that."

"In any case I'll trust you. I'm in love."

"Slingsby?"

"Desperately, devotedly in love. I—I've actually taken to writing verses, and if that's not a sure sign of being in love, I should like to know what is."

"Is the lady any one with whom I am acquainted?"

"No. She's a doctor's daughter. She lives down in Hampshire, and her father's dead."

"What is she like? Pretty, of course."

"Not so pretty as you, Cis."

"You have no right to say that, sir. If you love her, as you say you do, she ought to be perfection in your eyes."

"She is perfection in my eyes, but for all that she's not so pretty as you are. I don't know," added Slingsby, musingly, "that I should care to have a very pretty woman for my wife. I might grow jealous, you know, and that must be a jolly uncomfortable sort of feeling."

"Does your father know anything of this affair?"

“No—there’s the rub. I dare not tell him on any account. His heart is set on my marrying you, and as I’m altogether dependent on him, and shall be for three more years, it would never do to let him into the secret. But you can help me in my difficulty, Cis?”

“In what way can I help you, Slingsby?”

“By not letting any one know that there is nothing serious between you and me. You have not refused me yet, have you, because I have never made you an offer?”

“No; you have certainly not made me an offer, and till you do that, of course I can’t refuse you.”

“Then, of course, I can tell my father that you have not refused me; and if I were further to hint to him that you are hardly prepared to marry just yet, that you would prefer to wait, say, a year or eighteen months longer, would that be a very wide departure from the truth?”

“It would be no departure from the truth so far as I am concerned. I certainly am not prepared to take to myself a husband for a long time to come.”

“You know I can continue to look in here once or twice a week as usual; and perhaps you wouldn’t mind my being seen with you in the Row, now and then, or at the opera, or the theatre?”

“Not at all. Come with me as often as you like. I have very few engagements.”

“And if your Aunt Percival or Lady Loughton should hint anything to you about our supposed engagement, could you not give them to understand that you and I are on excellent terms with each

other, and that the less they interfere in the matter the better?"

"I certainly could do all that, although the doing of it would involve a certain amount of deception on my part."

"But deception that can harm nobody. If these worthy old souls would only leave you and me to look after our own happiness, there would be no occasion for subterfuge of any kind."

"Then, under cover of all this, you intend to carry on your flirtation with the doctor's daughter?"

"It's no flirtation, Cis, but a real downright serious case of spoons. I've promised to marry her, and I shall do so in spite of everything. If I can only keep my father in the dark till I'm five-and-twenty, then all will come right, and with your help, Cis, I shall be able to do that without much difficulty."

CHAPTER VIII.

“GOOD-BYE.”

“I AM rather glad to have found you alone, Clem,” said Lord Loughton, as he walked into his son’s studio in the course of the day following that on which he had received Mr. Flicker’s check for a hundred and fifty pounds. “I have something rather particular to say to you.”

Clem knew of old that his father’s “something particular” generally took the shape of a request for a loan, so he merely said, “Macer won’t be back for a couple of hours. Will you have a weed and some bottled ale?”

“Thank you, no. I can’t stay many minutes. How are you progressing with your Academy picture? That, of course, is the most important affair in the universe just now. I believe, if there were an earthquake to-morrow that swallowed up a thousand people, all that you painter fellows would do would be to cry, ‘Save my pictures.’ The egotism of art is something sublime.”

“We dignify it with another name,” answered Clem, with a laugh. “With us it becomes ‘devotion to art.’” He had had too much experience of his father’s tirades to take much notice of them. “I shall get my picture done, I suppose, and send it

in. Beyond that I know nothing. But as you don't care about modern paintings, I need not bore you by asking your opinion of it."

"Well, no, it's hardly worth while. I never see anything later than Sir Joshua that I care about. English art is dead—defunct as a door-nail."

"I am glad that the people with money don't all think as you do. But you had something particular to say to me."

"Yes; I am going to leave London for a time."

Clem suspended his brush in mid-air and stared at his father.

"A friend of mine, a gentleman whom I knew many years ago, has just succeeded to a very large property. As he is obliged to reside abroad on account of his health, he has asked me to undertake the management of his affairs for a time. He has extensive estates in different parts of the country, all of which require to be carefully looked after, so that I shall have no fixed location for any length of time. For reasons which you will not ask me to explain, I cannot give the name of my friend, nor can I tell you with certainty where I may be found at any particular date; but that will not matter, as I shall run up to London for a day or two to see *la mère* and you every month or six weeks. Should any occasion arise for you to communicate with me while I am away, a letter will always find me, addressed 'John Fildew, Esquire, Post-office, Shallowford, Northamptonshire.' You had better put the address down in your pocket-book so as to make sure of it."

"Have you broken the news to my mother?" asked Clem, as he wrote down the address.

"Yes; I mentioned it to her this morning, and though, of course, poor creature, she was rather cut up at first, she soon recovered her equanimity and agreed with me that it was all for the best. You see, Clem, this is just the sort of thing I have been looking out for for years — gentlemanly, dignified, not too much to do, and yet with an honorarium attached to it that, in the present state of our finances, we cannot afford to despise. For one thing, my dear boy, there will no longer be any necessity for my imposing on your good-nature, in addition to which I shall be in a position to make your mother an allowance of five guineas per month. I gave her the first five guineas this morning before leaving home."

"You need not have done that, sir," interposed Clem. "My mother should not have wanted for anything during your absence."

"I am quite sure of that, my boy. But in making this little arrangement I feel that I am simply doing my duty—and what a luxury for one's conscience that is!" His lordship's conscience had not been used to such luxuries for a long time, and probably appreciated them all the more by reason of their rarity.

"In addition to my allowance of five guineas per mensem," continued the earl, "your mother will have her own private income of fifty pounds a year, and will no longer have me for an encumbrance; so that, all things considered, she ought to be, and

doubtless will be, tolerably comfortable. There is one thing, however, Clem, that she wishes you to do. After I am gone she would like you to go back and sleep in your old room. She is rather timorous, poor thing, at the thought of being left alone."

"Of course I shall do that, sir," said Clem.

"Then I need not detain you longer. If you have half an hour to spare this evening before your mother's bedtime, look in and we will talk these matters over more in extenso." And extending a couple of fingers to his son and nodding a good-morning, the earl went, leaving Clem at a loss whether to be more pleased or sorry at what he had just heard.

The private income of fifty pounds a year to which Lord Loughton had referred when speaking of his wife was all that was now left of the fortune he had received with her on her wedding-day. It would hardly be too much to say that it was on account of that fortune he had married her. She was an orphan, the daughter of English parents who had emigrated to America. Her father had been originally a poor man, but had made a fortune during the last three or four years of his life. She fell in love with the handsome English scapegrace at a boarding-house where they happened to meet, and being her own mistress and well-to-do, and divining that he was poor—how poor she did not know till afterwards—she was not long in letting him see the preference which she felt for him. He, on his side, when once satisfied that her fortune was not a myth, was an ardent lover enough, and at the end of a few

weeks they were married. Not till the wedding morn did the bride know that her husband's name was not John Fildew, but John Marmaduke Lorrimore, and that same evening she was made to take a solemn oath never to divulge to living soul the secret of her husband's real name. So faithfully had the promise then given been kept that not even her own son had the remotest suspicion that the name he called himself by was not his own. As years slipped away Mrs. Fildew's fortune also slipped away, till nothing of it was left save the aforesaid fifty pounds per year, the principal of which neither she nor her husband could touch. With the struggling, poverty-stricken years that followed when the bulk of the fortune was gone we have nothing here to do.

It was owing to Clem's persuasions that his father and mother had at length agreed to remove all the way from Long Island to London. The lad had developed a remarkable talent for painting, but had got the idea into his head that he could have better instruction and make more rapid progress in London than elsewhere. But, in addition to that, Mr. Fildew, senior, was heartily sick of the States. So to London they had come, and there they had lived ever since. Clem, what with painting and what with drawing on wood for the magazines, was slowly but surely making his way, and was not only able to keep himself—in very modest style, it is true—but could also spare his father a pound a week for pocket-money. What he did in the way of helping his mother at odd times was known to no one but

him and her. He had lived at home till home was no longer comfortable for him; and even his mother had at length urged him to go into lodgings on his own account. That mother, whom he loved so well, was slowly but surely dying of an incurable complaint. She had been ill for years, and might be ill for years longer, before the end came; but that it was surely coming both she and those about her knew full well. And this knowledge it was that made the one great trouble of Clem's life.

The earl felt that he had much to do before his departure from London. After again seeing his son in the evening, but without giving him many more details as to his future proceedings than he had given him in the morning, he set out for the Brown Bear. This would be his last evening at the old haunt for a long time to come, if not forever; and when he called to mind the many pleasant hours he had spent in the little coffee-room, he felt quite sentimental—far more sentimental than he had felt at the thought of parting from his wife and son.

There was an extraordinary muster at the Brown Bear this evening, it having got noised about that it was Mr. Fildew's farewell visit. As a consequence, Mr. Fildew had to enter into particulars, which he detested doing, as to the why and the wherefore of his going away. He told them the same story that he had told to his son, with certain variations, the gist of it being that a very old friend of his had come into a large fortune and needed his, Mr. Fildew's, services as guide, philosopher, and friend.

Mr. Nutt was unanimously voted into the chair,

and a very pleasant and convivial evening followed. Mr. Fildew's health was drunk with musical honors, to which "His Grace" responded in a few well-chosen sentences, and wound up by ordering the landlord to bring in his biggest punch-bowl filled to the brim. On the heels of the first bowl came another; and when twelve o'clock struck several of the gentlemen present were hardly in a condition to find their way unaided to their homes, so that, as several of them afterwards averred, it was one of the pleasantest evenings they ever remembered to have spent.

At dusk, next afternoon, Lord Loughton bade farewell to his humble lodgings. His last words to his wife were to the effect that she might expect to see him again in three weeks or a month. Clem's offer to accompany him to the station was firmly negatived. However, Clem saw him into the cab, and heard him give instructions to be driven to King's Cross. Then there was a last wave of the hand and he was gone.

CHAPTER IX.

TRANSFORMATION.

WHEN the Earl of Loughton left home in a four-wheeled cab it was by no means his intention to drive direct to the railway. His first stopping-place, as soon as he got clear of the neighborhood where he was known, was at a French hairdresser's. When he came out of the shop, half an hour later, the cabman did not recognize him till he spoke. He had gone into the shop with a wild tangle of hair, beard, and mustache about his face, neck, and throat. He came out with his hair cropped after the military style, and with his face close shaved except for an imperial, and a thick, drooping mustache with carefully waxed tips, both of which had been artistically dyed. From the hairdresser's he drove to a certain well-known outfitting emporium, and here the transformation previously begun was consummated. Again the cabman opened his eyes, this time very wide indeed. His exceedingly shabby fare, respecting whose ability to pay him his legal charge he might well have had some reasonable doubts, was transformed into a military-looking, middle-aged gentleman (most people would have taken him for an officer in mufti), in a suit of well-fitting dark tweed, and an ulster. The frayed black satin stock and the patched boots had

disappeared with the rest, and when his fare with delicately gloved hand drew forth a snowy handkerchief, and a celestial odor of Frangipanni was wafted to his nostrils, the man could only touch his hat and say, in a sort of awed whisper, "Where to next, colonel?" Had he been bidden to drive to Hades he could hardly have wondered more.

The earl slept that night at the Great Northern Hotel, and went down to Brimley next morning after a late breakfast. He took up his quarters for the time being at the Duke's Head, the only really good hotel in the little town. Everybody was anxious to see the new Lord Loughton, concerning whose early life and long disappearance from the world many romantic tales were afloat, and he was just as willing to let himself be seen. For the first week or two he derived an almost childlike pleasure from hearing himself addressed as "my lord" and "your lordship," and from being the recipient of that adulation, mingled with a mild sort of awe, with which a nobleman is almost always regarded in small provincial towns. Twenty times a day he would gaze admiringly at the reflection of himself in the cheval-glass in his bedroom. He could hardly believe it was John Fildew of Hayfield Street, that shabby, bepatched individual, who smiled back at him from the glass. "And yet I am just the same that I was before," he said to himself with a sneer. "The only change in me is that which the barber and the tailor have effected."

He had several suits of clothes sent down after him, and he took a boyish pleasure in frequently

changing them. He always dressed for dinner, although there was no one to dine with him. When a young man he had been noted for his white hands, and he was determined that they should be white again, to which end he smeared them every night with some sort of unguent and slept in kid gloves. Every morning he measured himself carefully round the waist, and when at the end of a fortnight he found that his convexity in that region was less by three quarters of an inch, he felt as if he could go out into the street and play leap-frog with the boys. He had made up his mind from the first to go in for popularity. With the change in his fortunes he had in a great measure dropped that curt, sneering, cynical manner which had not contributed to render him popular in days gone by. There was now an easy condescension, a sort of genial affability, about him which charmed every one with whom he came in contact; but then, how little is needed to make us feel charmed with a lord! Everybody knew that he was poor—how poor they did not know—but everybody knew also that he was an earl, and as earls, even when their antecedents are somewhat shady, are no more plentiful than green pease in December, we are bound to make much of such as we have.

The news of Lord Loughton's sojourn at Brimley spread far and wide through the county, and he need never have lacked company had he been so minded. Nearly all the best families in the neighborhood left their cards, and he might have had a dozen visitors a day had he not given it out that he did not intend to see any one till he was safely housed in his new home.

Laurel Cottage was not much of a place for a peer to take up his abode in, but even peers must live according to their means. It was a little, white, two-storied house, containing only eight or nine rooms in all. Its front windows looked on to a circular grass-plot and a tiny carriage drive that opened from the main road. From its back windows could be seen a lawn, bordered by a terrace, and interspersed with clumps of flowers, with meadow after meadow beyond. Stable and coach-house were hidden away behind a shrubbery to the left.

Such as it was it was quite big enough for the needs of Lord Loughton, and he at once secured it. There was one stipulation connected with the letting of it which posed him for a moment, but for a moment only. It was a *sine quâ non* that the substantial, old-fashioned furniture should be taken at a valuation by the incoming tenant. The valuation was fixed at two hundred pounds. To this the earl, when he had walked slowly through the rooms, made no demur. The same evening he wrote as under to the dowager countess:

“MY DEAR AUNT,—I have taken Laurel Cottage, near this place, for a term of years, as I told you that I should do. It contains nine rooms. The rent is £60 a year, and it will suit me admirably. But I could not obtain possession till I agreed to take the furniture, which has been valued at £200. As it was an impossibility to live in a house without furniture, the opportunity seemed to me too good a one to be missed. Will you therefore kindly send me a check for the amount in question as early as possible, and oblige,

“Your affectionate nephew,

“LOUGHTON.”

After three days came the following laconic reply :

“ Check for £200 enclosed, but don't do this sort of thing again. An agreement is an agreement, and no further demands beyond the usual allowance will receive attention.”

The letter was undated and unsigned, but it was evidently in the countess's own writing. A few days later the earl removed to his new home.

He started his modest establishment with two women and one man servant. A gardener was engaged to come once a week to attend to the lawn and flowers. When the earl had paid his hotel bill and a few other expenses he found that upwards of two thirds of his £150 had gone already, while more than two months of the quarter had yet to run. But this did not trouble him. He calculated, and rightly, that when once he was established in Laurel Cottage he might go on credit for everything he wanted for several months to come. As a matter of fact, he was inundated with offers from tradespeople of all kinds, so that his only difficulty lay in choosing which of them he should patronize. Even horses and carriages were pressed on him, but he decided that for the present both stable and coach-house should remain empty. He might, perhaps, have afforded to buy a cheap cob if an opportunity for doing so had offered itself ; however, there would be time enough to think about such luxuries by and by. But in this matter, as in most others, he was probably actuated by some motive other than appeared on the surface.

Long before the earl had got quietly settled down one carriage after another came flashing up to the

little green gate of Laurel Cottage. His lordship was at home to everybody that called. Everybody was charmed with his affability and the simple kindness of his demeanor. "What delightful manners!" exclaimed the ladies, with one accord. "What ease and polished courtesy! A thorough man of the world, evidently." Could these fair dames have seen his lordship six weeks previously, as he sat behind a long pipe in the coffee-room of the B. B., with his brandy-and-water in front of him, what would their thoughts of him have been?

Calls, as a matter of course, were succeeded by pressing invitations to dinner. But the earl frankly pleaded his poverty; in fact, he almost made a parade of it before his newly found friends. "You say that you live three miles away. Pray tell me how I am to reach you when I have neither a hoof nor a wheel on the premises." Then, of course, came offers to send the brougham or other conveyance for him, which, equally as a matter of course, involved the sending of him home when the evening was at an end. For the earl had made up his mind that if people wanted him they must both send for him and send him back, and before long this necessity came to be accepted as a well-understood fact among those whom he honored with his company.

The vicar of the parish was one of the first to call at Laurel Cottage. Before leaving he expressed a hope that he should occasionally see his lordship at church, and his lordship was good enough to promise that next Sunday morning should find him in the vicar's pew. It was quite a novel sensation for the

earl to find himself inside a place of worship. The vicar's wife handed him an elegantly bound, large-print prayer-book, which he accepted with a smile and a little bow, but when he tried to follow the service and find the different places he got "terribly fogged," as he afterwards expressed it; and as he was afraid to let people see the dilemma he was in, he shut the prayer-book up altogether by and by, and tried to put on the air of a man who was so thoroughly familiar with the service that the book was rather an encumbrance to him than otherwise. "The places used to be easy enough to find when I was a lad," he muttered to himself; "but I suppose the Rubric has been altered since then, and evidently altered for the worse."

He had been rather dubious on his arrival at Brimley whether some of the very big people of the neighborhood might not still bear in mind some of the escapades of his early years, and decline to acknowledge him. But his uneasiness on this score was quickly dispelled. A new generation had grown up since he was a young man, and whatever any of the older people might remember, they held their tongues in public, and welcomed him as warmly as if he were the most immaculate of men and peers.

The nearest house to Laurel Cottage was a large red-brick mansion of modern erection and imposing appearance. It bore the dignified name of Bourbon House, from the fact of a certain French prince having at one time made it his home for a few months. As the earl was passing the lodge gates one day a

basket-carriage containing two very pretty young ladies was coming out. It then struck him for the first time that he had never been at the trouble to inquire who lived at Bourbon House, neither could he call to mind that any one from there had ever left a card at the Cottage. As soon as he reached home he sent for his man and questioned him. It then came out that Bourbon House was the home of a certain Mr. Orlando Larkins and his two sisters—the pretty girls whom the earl had remarked. The youthful Orlando, it appeared, was the son of a celebrated father—Larkins *père* having been none other than the inventor and vender of a certain world-famed pill. Everybody has heard of Larkins's pills, and hundreds of thousands of people have swallowed them. As the result, Mr. Larkins, senior, amassed a very comfortable fortune, which he more than doubled by certain lucky speculations. Having done this, there was nothing left him to do but to die; so die he did, and Orlando reigned in his stead. "He's said to be very rich, and he's nothing to do with the pill trade now, my lord," concluded the man. "He's a good-natured, sappy sort o' young gentleman; but somehow the swell people about here don't seem to take to him, and even the lads shout after him, 'How are you, young Pillbox?' when he goes riding into the town."

"Very rich and very good-natured, and not received into society," said the earl to himself. "It might, perhaps, answer my purpose to cultivate the acquaintance of Mr. Orlando Larkins."

CHAPTER X.

INFATUATION.

AT a quarter-past eleven on the morning of the Thursday following Clement Fildew's visit to Cado-gan Place, Mrs. Percival's brougham stopped at the corner of Elm Street, Soho, and from it alighted Miss Collumpton and Miss Browne. They were not long in finding No. 19, and when, in answer to their ring, the door opened apparently of its own accord, they might have been puzzled what to do next had not Clement come rushing down-stairs and piloted them the way they were to go.

Tony Macer had gone out in deep dudgeon. He was disgusted with Clem for having engaged himself to paint a couple of portraits when he ought to be devoting the whole of his attention to putting the finishing touches to his Academy picture. Indeed, Tony, who had a great opinion of Clem's abilities, did not like the idea of his friend taking to portrait-painting at all. "You will only spoil yourself for better work," he kept repeating. "Why should you fritter away your time in painting the commonplace features of a couple of nobodies? You had better set up as a photographer at once."

"Only these two," Clem had pleaded. "When I have finished these I won't try my hand at another portrait for a whole year."

Mr. Macer having ascertained at what hour the ladies were expected to arrive, set off growlingly for Hampstead in company with his sketch-book and his pipe.

"And this is a studio!" exclaimed Cecilia, as she halted for a moment on the threshold and looked round. "What a very strange place!"

"I hope you did not expect to find any halls of dazzling light," said Clem, with a laugh. "If so, it is a pity that you should be disenchanted. A poor painter's workshop is necessarily a poor sort of place."

"I think it quite delightful, and I like it immensely. So thoroughly unconventional, is it not?" she added, turning to Miss Browne. "For my part, I'm tired of drawing-rooms and fine furniture. One can breathe here."

Clem had nailed down a square of green baize on one part of the floor and had hired a couple of chairs and a few "properties" from Wardour Street. Miss Browne walked across the floor in her slow, stately way, and seated herself on one of the chairs. To her the studio was nothing but a dingy, commonplace room. How to arrange her draperies most effectively for the forthcoming sitting was the subject of paramount importance in her thoughts just now. She wore a pearl-gray satin robe this morning. She hoped that Mr. Fildew was clever at painting satin.

"Are both these pictures yours, Mr. Fildew?" asked Cecilia, pointing to two covered-up canvases standing on easels in the middle of the room.

"No. That one is my friend Macer's; this one is mine."

"If I am very good and promise not to make a noise or ask too many questions, may I see them, Mr. Fildew—both of them?"

"Certainly you may see them, Miss Browne, and that without making a promise of any kind. But I must warn you that neither of them is finished, and must therefore deprecate any severe criticism."

"I don't want to criticise them, but simply to see them," said Cecilia, as Clem flung back the coverings.

She looked at Tony's picture first. After contemplating it in silence for a little while, she said softly, and more as if talking to herself than to Clem, "I think that I should like to know Mr. Macer." Then she passed on to Clem's picture. But she had not looked at it more than half a minute before she discovered that one of the two faces depicted in it was an exact reproduction of her own. Sly Master Clem had painted her portrait from memory, and had stuck it into his picture. The warm color mounted to Cecilia's face, her eyes dropped, and she turned away without a word.

Clem readjusted the coverings, and when he turned Cecilia was sitting in the chair next to Miss Browne's, apparently immersed in the pages of *Punch*.

Clem got his colors, brushes, and palette, with the view of immediately setting to work. He had already planted his easel on the spot where he intended it to stand. The cause of Cecilia's blush had

been patent to him in a moment, and, while sorry to think that his audacity might possibly have annoyed her, he yet could not help feeling flattered by the fact of her having so quickly recognized her own likeness. "I have scared her a little," he said to himself. So for the present he addressed himself exclusively to Miss Browne, of course under the mistaken belief that she was Miss Collumpton, posing her and arranging her so as to suit best with his ideas of artistic effect.

Three quarters of an hour passed quickly, and then Miss Browne declared that she was tired. All this time Cecilia had scarcely spoken. "Now, Mora, dear, it's your turn," said Miss Browne to Cecilia.

"I am ready any time." Then it was her turn to be posed and arranged. For a little while no one spoke. Then Cecilia said, "Are both those pictures destined for the Academy, Mr. Fildew?"

"That is their destination if the Hanging Committee will deign to find room for them."

"Then, of course, they are intended for sale?"

"But whether they will find purchasers is another matter," answered Clement, with a shrug.

Cecilia said no more, and Mora, seeing that she was disinclined for talking, exerted herself for once, and kept up a desultory conversation with Clem till the sitting came to an end. Then the ladies went. There was no sign of lingering vexation or annoyance in Cecilia's way of bidding Clem good-morning, but she took care not to lift her eyes to his while she did so. The next sitting was fixed for the following Monday.

One, two, three sittings followed in rapid succession. Cecilia's brightness and gayety did not long desert her. She chattered with Clem as easily and lightly as at first, only she never alluded to the Academy pictures. When the third sitting was over, just as Cecilia was leaving the room, Clem slipped a brief note into her hand. Her fingers closed over it instinctively. She and Mora were to have called at several other places before going home, but Cecilia pleaded a headache, and they drove back direct to Cadogan Place.

After two hours spent in her own room, Cecilia went down-stairs. But she was restless and uneasy, and seemed unable to settle to anything for many minutes at a time. Sketching, reading, needle-work were each tried in turn, and each in turn discarded. Several times Mora looked at her with inquiring eyes, but said nothing. Twice her aunt said, "Cecilia, I do wish you wouldn't fidget so; you are as bad as any child of six."

The ladies dined early when they had no company. After dinner Mrs. Percival went out. The two girls sat by themselves in the drawing-room. By and by Mora went to the piano and began to play. Cecilia sat and looked into the fire and listened, or, without listening, felt, half-unconsciously, the sweet influence of the music steal into her senses. Then the twilight deepened, and Binks came in and lighted the lamps. But still Mora went on playing, and still Cecilia sat and gazed dreamily into the fire.

By and by Mora looked round and saw that she

was alone. Cecilia had slipped through the curtains that shrouded one end of the room from the conservatory beyond. There was just enough light in the conservatory to enable Mora to see Cecilia as she sat among the orange-trees at the foot of a statue of Silence, that loomed white and ghost-like above her. Mora knelt by her friend and took one of Cecilia's hands in hers and pressed it to her lips. "What is it, darling?" she whispered. "Tell me what it is that is troubling you." Cold and calculating in many ways as Mora Browne might be, there was at least one sweet, unselfish impulse in her heart, and that was her love for Cecilia Collumpton.

Cecilia responded to her friend's question by stooping and kissing her. Then she whispered—but it was a whisper so faint that if the statue bending over her with its white finger on its white lips had been endowed with life it could not have overheard what she said—"He has written to me and told me that he loves me!"

Mora started, but Cecilia's arms held her fast and would not let her go. "Who has written to you? Not Mr. Fildew?"

"Yes—Mr. Fildew."

"How sorry I am to hear this!"

"I am not sorry."

"You don't mean to say that—"

"Yes, I do. Why not?" Then Cecilia's arms were loosened, and Mora rose to her feet.

"Oh, Cecilia, I cannot tell you how grieved I am that I ever was a party to this deception!"

"Why should you be grieved, Mora?"

"Because if Mr. Fildew had been told from the first who you were, this terrible business would never have happened."

"I am not so sure of that. Men are sometimes very audacious. But it is no such terrible business after all."

"To me it certainly seems so, and I shall never forgive myself for helping to bring it about."

"And I can never be sufficiently grateful to you for the share you have had in it."

"This is infatuation, Cecilia. But don't, pray don't, tell me that you have any thought of encouraging Mr. Fildew's attentions."

"Encouraging his attentions! What phrases are these, Mora? Did I not tell you just now that—that Mr. Fildew has told me that he loves me, and did I not give you to understand that I care for him in return?"

"How wretched you make me feel! But you have not told him that you return his love?"

"Not one syllable has he heard from my lips."

"Then it is not too late to undo all this."

"I don't understand you, dear."

"You have never spoken to him—you have given him no encouragement—he knows nothing of your infatuation. Such being the case, he need never know. We will go to his studio no more. Some other artist shall paint your portrait. Mr. Fildew shall be quietly dropped, and in few weeks you will have forgotten that any such person had an existence in your thoughts."

Cecilia laughed, but there was a ring of bitterness

in her mirth. "I might be listening to the maxims of Lady Loughton or my Aunt Percival," she said. "But you have never loved, therefore I cannot expect you to sympathize with me."

"But you certainly would not marry this man, Cecilia?"

"I have never thought of marrying either 'this man,' as you call him, or any other man. But I certainly should not marry any one unless I did love him."

"I consider it a great impertinence on the part of Mr. Fildew to have addressed you at all."

"In what way is it an impertinence, Mora? However much we poor women may care for a man we cannot write to him and tell him so. We must wait till it pleases him to write or speak. Mr. Fildew is an artist and a gentleman. Perhaps I should not be far wrong in calling him a man of genius. It is I who ought to feel honored by the love of such a man."

"I cannot think where you contrive to pick up your strange ideas."

"Strange ideas, indeed! Why, Mora, with all my love for you, I believe you are one of those women who would rather marry a dunderhead with ten thousand a year than a Milton in a ragged coat."

"I certainly should not care for love in a garret, even with one of your so-called men of genius. And as for Milton, from what I have read of him, he was not one of the most agreeable of men to live with."

"The author of 'Paradise Lost' agreeable! Oh,

Mora, Mora! have you no sense of the incongruous?" With this Cecilia rose, and putting her arm in Miss Browne's, went back into the drawing-room.

"Since papa died I have not felt so unhappy as I do to-night," said Mora, presently.

"And I never so happy in my life." Then, turning to kiss her friend for good-night, Cecilia added, "There is one thing to be said; he is not making love to me because I am rich, and that, with me, goes for much. There is another thing to be said," she added, in a whisper; "he has asked me to meet him."

"An appointment! Oh, Cecilia!"

"Yes, an appointment. Why not?"

"But—"

"Not another word," said Cecilia, smilingly laying her hand on Mora's lips. "You have heard enough to fill your thoughts for a little while. Good-night and happy dreams."

Next morning Miss Browne was called away by a telegram. Her mother was seriously ill.

There was no opportunity before she went for any more confidences between Cecilia and herself.

CHAPTER XI.

CONFIDENTIAL.

Letter from MISS COLLUMPTON, in London, to MISS BROWNE, in the country.

“MY DEAREST MORA,—Your telegram of yesterday, followed by your letter, which came to hand this morning, was a great relief to our anxiety. Pray give our joint love (Aunt Percival’s and mine) to your dear mother, and say how happy it has made us to hear of such a decided change for the better.

“Had you not in your letter made a special point of asking me to furnish you with all particulars anent a certain affair, I should not have thought of troubling you at a time like the present. As, however, you want ‘to know, you know,’ I shall be glad to do my best to satisfy your curiosity.

“If you remember, dear, you seemed terribly shocked at the idea of Mr. Fildew having asked me to meet him. And yet, what else could the poor man do? Pray bear in mind that in his eyes I am only an indigent young lady, who earns her living by filling the post of companion to a rich young lady. He could not come to Cadogan Place and ask for me. He knows nothing of my friends and connections. Having very foolishly fallen in love with me, how else was he to plead his cause, how else say all that he wanted to say? I have no expectation of making a convert of you, simply because this is one of those questions that you and I look at from totally different points of view. In the first place, you would never fall in love with an artist—at least, not with one who, like Mr. Fildew, had still his way to fight; in the second place, you would never give any man who had not an assured income the slightest encouragement to fall in love with you. Still, without hoping that anything I can say will induce you to modify your views, I must, in justice to myself, put down some of the reasons by which I have been influenced in doing as I have done. All through the

affair I have argued with myself in this wise: Supposing I were really a poor girl who was earning her living in a shop or a warehouse, or it matters not how, and Clement had fallen in love with me, what form would our courtship have taken? how and where should we have seen each other? and so on. Thousands of such courtships are going on around us every day. It was only to imagine that Cis Collumpton had lost the whole of her fortune, or had never had any to lose. In short, I wanted to be loved for myself alone; I wanted to be courted as if I were a girl without a 'tocher.'

"Well, I met him by appointment at seven o'clock one evening, in a quiet crescent not far from Sloane Street. He lifted his hat, shook hands, and said how pleased he was to see me. Then he put my hand under his arm, and so took possession of me. 'We can talk better thus,' he said; 'I have something particular to say to you; besides, I want to have you as close to me as possible.'

"Would you believe it, Mora, I seemed to have altogether 'lost my tongue,' as we used to say when I was a little girl. For aught I had to say for myself, I might have been brought up in the farthest Hebrides. However, he did not seem to mind whether I answered him or not; he had taken me into custody, as it were, and I had no power to resist—nor any inclination either, for the matter of that.

"He began by apologizing for the liberty he had taken in asking me to meet him; 'but as you are here,' he added, 'I may, perhaps, hope that I have not transgressed beyond forgiveness; although, indeed,' he went on, 'I knew of no other mode of obtaining an opportunity of saying all that I want to say.' Still I was tongue-tied, still the words refused to come. The next ten minutes were the most memorable of my life. How my heart beat! how his words thrilled me from head to foot! What he said you can perhaps faintly imagine; if you cannot, I cannot tell you.

"He pressed me for an answer. Then my tongue was loosened. It would not be worth while to put down here what I said, even if I could do so, which I very much doubt. The result was that I promised to meet him again the following Friday evening at the same time and place, and give him an answer of some kind.

“What that answer would be was a foregone conclusion from the first. I might just as well have said ‘Yes’ then and there, but that I would not have him think I was to be quite so easily won. He pressed my hand to his lips at parting. I left him at the corner at which I had met him, and ran nearly all the way home. Of course, dear, you may be sure that the first thing I did when I found myself alone was to have a good cry. But what happy tears they were! From all which you will understand that your poor Cecilia’s case is a desperate one indeed.

“How the time passed till Friday came round I hardly know. I wanted it to come and yet I didn’t, if you can understand such a paradox. I longed and yet I trembled, and when Friday evening was really here I wished it were only Thursday. However, I met him as agreed, and was again taken possession of. ‘I am afraid you are cold,’ he said. ‘You ought to have wrapped yourself up more warmly.’ I was trembling a little, but not with cold. We walked slowly along, and for some minutes Clement said very little. I think he saw that I was put out, and he was giving me time to recover myself. At length my hand ceased to tremble, and then he spoke, asking me whether I had thought over his words—whether I felt that I could accept his love and give him mine in return? A church clock was beginning to strike eight as he finished speaking. Not till the last stroke had ceased to reverberate did I make any reply. Then for answer I laid one of my hands softly on one of his. ‘God bless you, dear one!’ he said. ‘May you never regret the gift you have given me to-night.’ Then, before I knew what had happened, a strong arm was passed round my waist and Clement’s lips were pressed to mine. A lamp was no great distance off and a policeman was passing at the moment. The man turned his head and coughed discreetly behind his hand. I turned hot all over, but Clement only laughed, and said it would not have mattered if all the world had been there to see.

“After that we had a long, delicious walk through quiet streets and squares where there were few passers-by. There was a sweet, new feeling at my heart of belonging to some one and of some one belonging to me. Clement asked whether he should write to or see my father. Then I told him that I was an orphan and my own mistress. ‘In that case our marriage

need not be long delayed,' he said. This frightened me. I had never contemplated such a contingency except as something very remote and far-off indeed. After that he began to talk to me about his position and prospects. He was far from rich at present, he said, and could not give me such a home as he would have liked; but he hoped to be better off by and by. He was getting higher prices for his pictures, and people were beginning to seek him out. If only his Academy picture found a purchaser there was no reason why we should not be married before midsummer. Knowing what I did, I could have clapped my hands for glee as I listened to him. I said I was afraid that I could not make arrangements to be married before Christmas at the very soonest. I could see that he was disappointed. 'I shall certainly hold you to midsummer,' he said, 'unless you can give some good and valid reason for delay.'

" 'You must come and see my mother before you are many days older,' he said, presently. 'I have spoken to her about you already.' Would you believe it, Mora, a little jealous pang shot through my heart when he said this? I felt as if I did not want even a mother to come between him and me. But next moment I put away the thought as utterly unworthy, and said how pleased I should be to see and know Mrs. Fildew.

"Then he told me that his mother had been an invalid for years, and that there was no hope of her ever being any better. He told me, too, how cheerful she was—how bravely she bore up against the insidious disease that was slowly but surely eating away her life. I hated myself for allowing even a moment's jealous feeling to find room in my heart. I would try to love her as much as Clement loved her; but what if she should turn against me and say that her son's choice was a foolish one?

"This evening Clement would insist on walking with me nearly to the door. I was in mortal fear lest my aunt should chance to be passing and should recognize me. But nothing happened except that, when the moment came for saying good-night, Clement repeated the process which had frightened me so much before. But I don't think that even a policeman saw us this time: still I must admit that it was very dreadful. All that night I hardly slept a wink. I felt that I had taken the great, irrevocable step of my life. Did I regret it? you will perhaps ask. No; a thousand times no!

“It was arranged that at our next meeting I should accompany Clement to his mother’s to tea. Mrs. Fildew’s hour for tea is six o’clock, from which you will at once infer that she belongs to the old school, and having grown up when people took their meals at more rational hours than they do now, she still keeps up the traditions of other days. I had hitherto had no difficulty in stealing out for an hour without my aunt knowing anything about it, but to leave home at half-past five and not get back till ten or eleven, without saying where I was going, or ordering the brougham to take me, was a matter that required a little diplomacy. I hit on a plan at last which I need not detail here, and that without having to tell my aunt any absolute fib about it. It is sufficient to say that I met Clement at the appointed time and place, and that three minutes later I found myself with him in a hansom cab and being whirled along Piccadilly at a tremendous pace. It was not nearly dark yet, and we passed several people whom I had seen only an hour previously in the Row. What their thoughts would have been had they seen Miss Collumpton flashing past them in a hansom, I leave you to imagine.

“I am quite aware, Mora, that in confessing to all this I am shocking some of your most cherished prejudices. But where is the use of having prejudices unless you can have them pleasantly shocked now and again? Does not the process put you in mind of an electrical machine, and of the brass rods we used to touch so tremblingly when we were girls at school?

“It is almost worth while being poor for the sake of riding about in a hansom. A ride in a brougham or a victoria is the tamest of tame affairs in comparison. I had never been in a hansom before that evening when I went to see Mrs. Fildew, but I have been in one several times since—of course, with Clement to keep me company. How ‘jolly’ it is when you happen to have a good horse and a skilful driver! (The adjective may sound objectionable, dear Mora, but I can’t hit on another just now that expresses my meaning half so clearly.) How quickly you get over the ground! How you dash in and out among carriages, carts, and busses, leaving them behind one after another! Everybody and everything seem to get out of your way. The wind blows in cheerily—perhaps a few drops of rain dash against your face now and then, but you don’t mind them in the

least. You experience a sense of freedom, of brisk open-air enjoyment, such as no other mode of conveyance that I know of can give you. And then how cosey inside! Just room for two, and none to spare. But that doesn't matter in the least if your companion is some one you like to sit close to. I wonder whether it would be wrong, Mora, for you and me to be driven out in a hansom some afternoon by our two selves. But you are such a slave to Mrs. Grundy that I almost despair of being able to persuade you to join me in such an expedition.

"Here I am at the end of my paper and I have not introduced you to Mrs. Fildew. I must consequently defer that pleasure till I write to you again, which will be not later than the day after to-morrow. I have much to tell you yet. Pray let me hear from you by return, if only a word to say how your mother is progressing. I cannot tell you how lonely I feel while you are away.

"Your affectionate friend,

"CECILIA COLLUMPTON."

CHAPTER XII.

CECILIA AND THE COUNTESS.

Second letter from MISS COLLUMPTON in London to MISS BROWNE in the country.

“MY DEAREST MORA,— . . . The close of my last letter left Clement and me in a hansom cab in the act of being driven to the lodgings of Mrs. Fildew. Clement told me that his mother had lately moved into fresh apartments no great distance from his studio. I cannot tell you how nervous I became as the moment of my introduction to Mrs. Fildew drew near. What if I should read in her eyes that she thought her son had chosen unwisely? It would not have mattered so much if Clement had not set such store by her opinion—if his love had been of that lukewarm kind which many grown-up sons have for their mother. But in this case it was different, and unless I were loved and liked by Clement’s mother I should feel as if I possessed only half of Clement’s heart.

“At length the cab stopped and my pulses beat faster than ever. Three minutes later I found myself in Mrs. Fildew’s presence—found myself on my knees by her side, while her hands, that trembled a little, rested for a few moments on my hair and her eyes gazed anxiously and inquiringly into mine. Then she bent forward a little and pressed her lips to my forehead.

“‘My boy has told me how much he loves you,’ she said. ‘But I welcome you here, not for his sake only, but for your own also. I often used to wish that Heaven had given me a daughter. At last my prayer has been answered.’ Then she kissed me again, and after that I sat down close beside her, but she still kept possession of one of my hands and caressed it softly with hers.

“Mrs. Fildew is a pale and delicate-looking elderly lady, with a thin, worn face and a profusion of snow-white hair. When

young she must have been very beautiful. I think I told you in my last letter that she has been a confirmed invalid for years. She cannot walk more than a few yards without great pain and difficulty. From the time she rises till the time she goes to bed she sits in a large easy-chair that runs on noiseless wheels, which Clement has had specially made for her. She can work the wheels with her hands, and so propel herself to any part of the room at will. She keeps one servant, a strong, middle-aged woman, who has been with her several years. Sometimes, on sunny afternoons, Mrs. Fildew and her chair are carried downstairs, and Martha takes her mistress for an airing up and down some of the streets where there is not much traffic, or as far as a certain florist's where they have fresh flowers in the window every morning.

"Once a week Clement comes with an open carriage and takes his mother for a drive into the country. The next time they go on one of these expeditions I am to go with them.

"Presently Martha brought in tea, which we drank out of quaint old biscuit-china, the cups being without handles, and the saucers excessively shallow. We had thin bread-and-butter, watercresses, sardines, damson jam, and a cake from the confectioner's. The tea itself was simply delicious—far superior to any that we ever have at home. The truth is, I suppose, that our servants don't know how to make tea properly; or else, which is quite as likely, they keep the best of it for themselves and only send us up what they leave. I don't think that I ever tasted watercresses before that afternoon; you have no idea how nice they are. To eat them is to be put in mind of country streamlets and all the sights and sounds that go with them—of hidden waterways that betray themselves by their babbling, and— But I 'loiter round my cresses.'

"This six-o'clock tea, with thin bread-and-butter and watercresses, is an 'institution' that I shall never despise again.

"When tea was over Clement had to go out on business, and Mrs. Fildew and I were left alone. Why do women seem all at once to become so confidential towards each other the moment there is no longer a man in the room? I say 'seem,' because such confidences are generally more apparent than real. Mrs. Fildew and I followed the universal rule. Although Clement was so dear to us, and although we talked of nothing in his ab-

sence that we might not have said freely before his face, yet the moment he had left the room a spell seemed taken off our tongues, and we both felt that we were going to enjoy a good long talk.

“‘I hope your situation is a comfortable one, my dear, and that you like it?’ said Mrs. Fildew.

“‘I had to think for a moment, and call to mind what my situation was supposed to be before answering her that I liked it exceedingly.

“‘Companion to a young lady, is it not? Yes. Well, I’m glad to hear that you are comfortable. Of course, you have nothing to do with cooking or the superintendence of housework?’

“‘Nothing whatever, Mrs. Fildew.’

“‘Do you know, my dear, I think that’s rather a pity.’

“‘Why so, Mrs. Fildew?’

“‘Because Clement is far from being a rich man, although, of course, there is no knowing what his talents may do for him in time to come, and it would be just as well that his wife should know how to manage and look after a small establishment without trusting too implicitly to her servants. But probably you had some training in such matters when you were a girl at home?’

“‘Very little training of that kind,’ I said rather bitterly. My face burned, and I felt humiliated by my ignorance.

“‘Dear, dear! all young girls ought to be taught how to manage a house,’ continued Mrs. Fildew, in that soft, low voice of hers, which seems as if it could never have spoken an unkind word to any one.

“‘One is never too old to learn if one has a mind to do so, Mrs. Fildew,’ I said.

“‘Well spoken, my dear. The will to learn and a little perseverance will work wonders. I don’t suppose that Clement will be able to afford more than one servant at first, and for twelve or fourteen pounds a year you can’t expect to get a good cook, especially when she has to do the rest of the housework as well. Therefore it is all the more necessary that her mistress should be able to take an active part in all home matters. But I am afraid that you are underrating your knowledge. A woman who can roast a leg of mutton — or see it properly

roasted—and who is not above beating up a pudding now and then, or turning out a little light pastry, need never be afraid of getting married.’

“‘But, dear Mrs. Fildew, I can’t do any of the things you mention,’ I cried, with consternation. ‘I never made a pudding or a bit of pastry in my life; and as for cooking a joint, I am afraid it would not be fit to send to table by the time I had done with it.’

“‘The dear old lady’s busy fingers ceased their movements. She looked at me in silence for a moment, but I thought that her look seemed to say, ‘Then, pray, young lady, what is there that you can do?’

“‘People are generally what they are taught to be,’ I said, between laughing and crying. ‘I cannot bake, or boil, or make preserves, but I know how to do one or two useless things. I can read Dante or Goethe in the originals. I can sketch from nature. I can play on the piano and the harp. People tell me that I can sing tolerably. I can drive, I can ride, and I can swim.’

“‘Then, my dear, you are far too clever a young lady to enter a kitchen or look after the cooking of your husband’s dinner. Clement ought to be, and no doubt is, very proud to think that he has won your heart; but you and he ought not to get married on less than a thousand a year.’

“‘I looked at Mrs. Fildew, in doubt whether her last speech was not meant as a sarcasm. But one glance into her dear face was enough to satisfy my mind on that point. I don’t believe that she ever gave utterance to a sarcastic speech in her life. ‘I am not aware, Mrs. Fildew, that I have expressed any anxiety to get married for ever such a long time to come. I am quite willing to wait—for years.’

“‘Perhaps so, my dear, but Clement may not be possessed of your patience.’

“‘But surely I shall have a voice in a matter of so much importance?’

“‘Undoubtedly. But for all that, men generally contrive to get their own way in these things, as you will find.’

“‘I confess, Mora, that the thought of this early marriage frightens me. I ought to have bargained at the outset that it should not take place for a couple of years at the soonest. I

know that you, with your strong mind, would say that it is not too late even now to 'put my foot down' and vow that I won't be married till I'm ready to be. But then, dear, I neither possess your strength of mind nor have you ever been in love, so that, all things considered, I'm afraid my resistance would be a very futile one. Methinks I hear you say, 'How humiliating of Cecilia to make such a confession!' Even so, sweet one. *N'importe*. I would not exchange my fetters for your freedom.

" 'What a useless, good-for-nothing creature you must take me to be, Mrs. Fildew,' I said, glad to get away from the marriage question.

" 'Indeed, my dear, but there is no such thought in my head. You have been brought up as if you were a young lady of fortune—that is all. And, now I come to think of it, I doubt very much whether Clement would allow his wife to trouble herself about kitchen arrangements or the proper cooking of a dinner. Men nowadays seem to think their wives are only made to be ornamental, and I suppose my boy will be no exception to the rule. When I was young things were different.'

" 'I'll buy a cookery-book to-morrow,' I cried in desperation. 'It is never too late to learn.'

" Mrs. Fildew smiled at me, a little compassionately, as I thought.

" 'It is never too late to make a good resolution,' she said. 'But if a young woman has not been trained up to housekeeping ways at home, it is not to be expected that she can take kindly to them when she grows up. I wouldn't bother about it if I were you, my dear. I dare say Clement will like you all the better for having been brought up as a fine lady.'

" But I kept my word, and next day I made myself the happy possessor of a cookery-book. My aunt never suspected that it was anything but a novel when I brought it out after luncheon. I read page after page of it, dipping here and there, till I had got a jumble of recipes mixed higgledy-piggledy in my brain, and was in a pitiable state of imbecility.

" Next morning I sought a private interview with Hannah, the cook, the result of which was that, in return for a certain consideration, she was to give me a lesson in the art of cookery of one hour's duration, each morning. I have had five lessons already; they are immense fun, and I can safely say that I never

enjoyed my music-lessons half so much. You shall have a practical proof of the progress I have made as soon as you get back to Cadogan Place. We will have a little dinner 'all by our two selves,' as we used to say at school, every dish at which shall be cooked by your Cecilia. I have written out the *menu* already.

"Of course your comment on all this will be, 'Just like Cecilia—just like her, to waste time and money over some scheme that can never possibly be of any practical use either to herself or anybody else.' But don't you know, dear, that knowledge is power? Besides, one never can tell what may happen. Some day my husband may be a poor man, and then I shall be able to astonish him. By-the-bye, do you know what a roly-poly dumpling is? If you don't there is a treat in store for you. I made a monster one yesterday for the servants. I will make a little one for you and me when I get you back again.

"I don't think I have told you yet how Mrs. Fildew occupies her time. She mends old lace for a large emporium at the West End. The way in which she does it, so as to all but defy detection, is marvellous. It seems to me a charming occupation for a poor gentlewoman, combining in itself the practical and the æsthetical. I could sit and watch her for hours as she deftly takes up stitch after stitch and loop after loop till ragged leaf and frayed flower look as good as new.

"Clement had never talked to me much about his father, but from Mrs. Fildew I learned several particulars concerning him. That he was a gentleman born and a gentleman bred Mrs. Fildew was very particular in striving to impress on my mind. It appears that they were married in America, and there my Clement was born. Mr. Fildew, senior, it would seem, was so entirely a gentleman that it was never expected of him that he should do anything for a living. 'You know, dear, I am not a lady by birth,' said Mrs. Fildew, frankly; 'therefore, of course, it is only right and proper that I should work—in fact, I could not live without it. And then there is Clement; so that, altogether, we are very comfortable in our humble way.'

"Not knowing what to say, I said nothing.

"'My husband is from home just now,' continued Mrs. Fildew. 'If you had been here three days ago you would have seen him. Some old friend of his has come into a large property and has asked John to go down to his place and put it into something

like order for him. Of course, this is not like any ordinary kind of work, or I should not have been willing for him to go. It is merely a little service rendered by one friend to another. My husband has been a gentleman all his life, and it would never do for him to lower himself to any commonplace drudgery now.'

" 'I should very much like to see Mr. Fildew,' I said—and so I should. I think I can understand now why Clement hardly ever mentions his name.

" 'I don't expect him in town for two or three weeks, but when he does come Clement must bring you and introduce you to him. There is an aristocratic style, an air of distinction, about Mr. Fildew, which you will not fail to recognize at once. Clement has the same style, only in a lesser degree; but he will never be as handsome a man as his father.'

" Presently Clement came in, and then we had some music. I find that 'my boy,' as his mother fondly calls him, plays the violin. With that and the piano, and your Cecilia's thin soprano, the evening was gone far too quickly. It was a happy time. Ten o'clock brought a cab, and half an hour later I was at home. Good-night and God bless you. More another day.

" Your affectionate friend,

C. C."

CHAPTER XIII.

“YOUNG PILLBOX.”

ONE day, at a dinner at Sir Harry Yoxford's, among other people to whom Lord Loughton was introduced was a certain Mr. Wellclose, a lawyer, who had the charge of Sir Harry's legal business, together with that of various other great people of the neighborhood. Mr. Wellclose, a fussy, talkative, middle-aged man, who dearly loved a lord, contrived to seat himself next the earl in the smoking-room. He seemed to know everything about everybody; and before the evening was over Lord Loughton had contrived to extract from him a considerable amount of information which might or might not be useful to him at some future time. “By-the-bye, Mr. Wellclose,” said the earl, “are you at all acquainted with my next-door neighbor at Bourbon House?”

“I have had occasion to meet Mr. Orlando Larkins several times on business,” said the attorney, “and a very pleasant young gentleman I have found him to be.”

“I think I have heard somewhere that he doesn't get on very well with the county folk hereabouts? Probably his antecedents are against him.”

“That's just it, my lord. His father was a cele-

brated pill-maker; and his name being rather an uncommon one, people can't forget the fact."

"What a pity it is that the world is not more good-natured! What on earth have a man's progenitors to do with the man himself?"

"My own sentiments exactly, if I may make so bold as to say so," said Mr. Wellclose, who always made a point of agreeing with his superiors. "I'm sure I've not the remotest idea who or what my great-grandfather was, and I shouldn't be a bit better man if I had. But as regards young Larkins, I was talking with him the other day, and he seems quite down-hearted. Of course, there are plenty of people about here—such as they are—who would only be too happy to visit him, or to see his feet under their mahogany, simply because he is rich; but the tip-top people, among whom it is the ambition of his life to mix, give him the cold shoulder, and no mistake. His name seems to cling to him wherever he goes. The poor fellow was telling me about his tour on the Continent a little while ago. Wherever he went people looked at him—or he fancied they did—and whispered to each other; and on one or two occasions some low cads at the *table d'hôte* ranged half a dozen pill-boxes in front of their plates, and made believe to swallow a bolus or two between every course, and so drove the poor fellow away."

"He must be rather foolishly sensitive about such matters."

"Well, he is. I don't think he can be said to possess a very strong mind at the best of times; but for

all that he is a very generous-hearted, good-natured fellow, and I'm sorry for him."

"I've been told that his father left him tolerably well off."

"So he did, my lord—and all out of pills; or, rather, pills laid the foundation of his fortune, and lucky speculations did the rest. The son's income is as near twelve thousand a year as makes no matter. Then there are the two young ladies, his sisters, who will have twenty thousand apiece on their wedding-day."

"Why didn't you and I go into the pill-trade, eh, Wellclose?"

"Just the question I often put to Mrs. W., my lord."

"The only way for Larkins to get out of his difficulty is for him to marry and change his name to that of his wife."

"A capital idea, my lord, which I won't fail to suggest to him the next time I see him. Talking about matrimony reminds me that Mr. Larkins has an unmarried aunt—a younger sister of his mother—who also has twenty thousand pounds settled on her. Thirty-six years of age and twenty thousand pounds!" As he said these words with much unction the keen-eyed lawyer glanced up sharply in the earl's face.

"I'm afraid the lady must be too fastidious or she would surely have been snapped up long ago," said the earl, as he knocked the ash off his cigar.

"Perhaps so—perhaps an early disappointment or something of that kind. But, by Jove! what a prize, eh, my lord? What a galleon to capture and tow

safely into the harbor of Matrimony!" Again he glanced up keenly into the earl's face.

"I tell you what, Wellclose," said his lordship, presently, "I think I must get you to introduce me to young Larkins one of these days."

"I shall be only too happy, my lord."

It fell out, however, that Lord Loughton was enabled to make the acquaintance of Mr. Larkins without the assistance of Mr. Wellclose. Twice a week the earl took a return-ticket between Brimley and Shallowford. The two places were thirty miles apart. At the latter town the earl was quite unknown, and it was to the post-office there that he had requested Clem to write to him, if necessary, under his old name of Mr. Fildew. Twice a week he went over to see if any letters were waiting for him. As he was coming back one day, about a week after the dinner at Sir Harry's, he found a gentleman in the carriage into which he got at Shallowford. At the next station some one came up to the window and addressed the stranger as Mr. Larkins.

As soon as the train was under way again the earl spoke. "Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. Larkins of Bourbon House?" he said.

Mr. Larkins blushed, and stammered out a reply to the effect that he was the individual in question.

"I am the Earl of Loughton, and I am very glad to be able to make the acquaintance of my next-door neighbor. One can afford to be isolated in town, but that rule hardly holds good in the country." Then he held out his hand and wrung the young man's fingers very cordially. "Why did you not call upon

me, Mr. Larkins, or at the very least send in your card?"

"I—I was afraid of being considered an intruder. The difference in our social status and all that, my lord."

"Pooh, pooh, my dear sir, I trust the age we live in is too enlightened to retain many antiquated prejudices of that kind. A gentleman is a gentleman all the world over, whether he be a duke or a ploughman."

"I assure you, my lord, that I have been snubbed and slighted in a great many quarters, simply because my father was—well, simply because he made his money in business."

"Can it be possible! Thank Heaven, there is no nonsense of that kind about me. If I like a man, I like him, and I never stop to ask him who was his grandfather."

"Ah, my lord, if all the aristocracy were only like you!"

"Oh, I don't want to set myself up as a pattern, but those are my sentiments. I think that you and I, being such near neighbors, ought to be good friends. What do you say to dropping in to-morrow morning about eleven, and having a bit of breakfast with me? I don't give dinner-parties, because I'm too poor. But I like to have somebody to breakfast with me."

Mr. Larkins was overwhelmed by the earl's condescension. At last the golden portals were about to open to his touch. Would the Viponds and the Cosingtons dare to snub him in future when they found him hand-and-glove with an earl? Mr. Larkins's trap

was waiting at the station. It was one of the happiest half-hours of that young man's life when he was seen by the good people of Brimley driving Lord Loughton home to Laurel Cottage.

Mr. Larkins did not fail to put in an appearance next morning at the earl's breakfast-table. On the following day his lordship dined *en famille* at Bourbon House, on which occasion Orlando's sisters were introduced to him. They were two really pretty and well-mannered girls of seventeen and nineteen. There was a vein of simplicity and effusive good-nature running through the young man's character that the earl was not slow to note, and appraise at its proper value. From that time forward the pill-maker's son and Lord Loughton were very frequently to be seen in each other's company. They drove out together, they rode together (in Orlando's carriages and on Orlando's horses), they played billiards together, they dined together, and they smoked together. Hardly a week passed without a hamper of wine or a box of cigars finding its way to Laurel Cottage. Fruit was sent nearly every day. A saddle-horse and a brougham were specially retained for the earl's own use. The quidnuncs of Brimley found much food for gossip anent these proceedings; but as the earl was notoriously poor and Mr. Larkins as notoriously rich, they rather admired the arrangement than otherwise. It was, of course, patent to everybody why the earl so persistently patronized the pill-maker's son, but none the less on that account were several doors now thrown open to Orlando which had heretofore been inexorably shut in

his face. People began to discover virtues and good qualities in the young man the existence of which they had never suspected before. The Honorable Mrs. Templemore and Lady Wildman, neither of whom were rich and both of whom had several unmarried daughters, began to angle for him openly. When, a little later on, and at the earl's suggestion, he ventured to send out invitations for a garden-party, to be followed by a carpet-dance, nearly everybody who was asked came, and it was universally admitted to have been one of the most successful things of the season. From that time forward Mr. Larkins was accepted without question as "one of us."

All this suited well with the earl's grim and morbid humor. He laughed at Larkins and he laughed at those who, having at first tabooed him, were now willing to welcome him with open arms. He generally spent a solitary hour in his little smoking-room before going to bed, musing over the events of the day, and planning the morrow's campaign. At such times—his servants being all in bed, he indulged himself in a long clay pipe and a couple of glasses of hot brandy-and-water. The brandy and the pipe, together with a supply of the strong tobacco which he used to smoke during his evenings at the Brown Bear, were all kept under lock and key, in company with the worn and shabby pouch which had done him such good service in days gone by. It amused him at such times to think how people must talk about him, and he acknowledged to himself that he liked being talked about. His coming had caused quite a commotion among the stagnant circles of Brimley

and its neighborhood. His sayings and doings, his habits and mode of life, supplied an unfailing topic of conversation at a hundred dinner-tables and twice as many tea-tables. He was already acquiring a reputation for eccentricity. It was a reputation that suited him, and he determined to cultivate it.

It was not till the lapse of two months after his arrival at Brimley that he went up to London to see his wife and son. He dressed himself for the occasion in a suit of sober tweed, and left behind him the gold watch and chain which a Brimley tradesman had only been too happy to press upon him, and the diamond ring that Larkins had made him a present of. From the moment he got out of the train at King's Cross till the moment he got into it on his return he was to be plain John Fildew again. He quite enjoyed the masquerade, and chuckled to himself several times in the cab before he was set down at the corner of Oxford Street. Clem had apprised him of the change in Mrs. Fildew's lodgings. When he walked into his wife's sitting-room without knocking, that lady stared at him for a moment in utter surprise, and then said, "Have you not mistaken the room, sir?"

"Why, Kitty, dear, don't you know me?" he asked, and then he crossed the room and kissed his astonished wife.

"How was it likely I should know you, John? You are not a bit like your dear old self," and with that she began to cry.

Clement, when he came in, was almost as much surprised, but he showed it in a different way. The

change in his father was so thorough and so striking that he could hardly believe him to be the same man who had left them only a few weeks previously ; and that evening he felt a degree of respect for him such as he had never experienced before. He had heard his mother insist a thousand times on the fact of his father being a gentleman bred and born, but for the first time in Clem's experience he looked the character. The earl dilated in a hazy but grandiloquent sort of way about his new prospects and his new mode of life. It was not to be expected that he should condescend to particulars ; and as both his wife and son knew that he had a horror of being questioned, they listened to all he had to say, and troubled him with no inconvenient queries. Clement was well content that matters should remain as they were, but Mrs. Fildew, in addition to the grief she felt at her husband's absence, was somewhat fearful in her mind lest her " dear John " should have compromised his dignity by engaging in work that was derogatory to his status as a gentleman.

Mr. Fildew's stay in London was only from the dusk of one afternoon till the evening of the next. His avocations were of such a pressing and important nature, he said, that it was impossible for him to make a longer stay just then. In the state of his wife's health—a subject respecting which he was anxious for more reasons than one—there was little apparent change since he left London. She was certainly no better, but neither did there seem any perceptible alteration for the worse. He longed to go and spend an evening with his old cronies at the

Brown Bear, but after mature consideration he deemed it better not to do so. He looked and felt so changed that his old friends would hardly welcome him as being any longer one of themselves. Besides, for anything he knew to the contrary, some of them might some day find themselves at Brimley and encounter him there; but if they were not made acquainted with the alteration in his appearance, he flattered himself that, even so, they would hardly recognize him. It was decidedly to his interest to give the Brown Bear as wide a berth as possible.

Great, therefore, was the earl's surprise and chagrin when, as he was walking down the platform in search of a smoking-carriage on his return journey, he nearly stumbled over Mr. Cutts, the landlord of the Brown Bear. "I really beg your pardon," exclaimed the earl, before he had time to recognize the man. At the sound of the familiar voice Cutts stared, and then the earl saw that it was too late to retreat. Grasping the landlord by the hand, and making believe that he was delighted to see him, he hurried him off to the refreshment bar. In order to keep Cutts from questioning him, which might have been inconvenient, he kept on questioning Cutts. Everybody, it appeared, with one exception, was quite well, and going on much as usual. "Of course you remember Pilcher?" said Cutts. "Ah, well, he's come to grief, poor devil, and quite suddenly too. It seems that a scamp of a brother persuaded him to accept a bill for a big amount. The brother bolted, Pilcher couldn't meet the bill, some other creditors came down on him, and his stock was seized. Meanwhile

his wife died, and the result of the blooming business was that poor Pilcher was turned adrift on the world without a penny to bless himself with, and with three young 'uns, all under eight, to call him father."

"Poor Pilcher, indeed! But, of course, you did something for him at the Brown Bear?"

"Yes—what we could. Couldn't do much, you know. Sent the hat round and got about six pounds—enough to bury his wife, I dare say. He shouldn't have been such a fool. I'd sooner trust a stranger than a relation any day."

"And where's Pilcher now?"

"Can't say. Somewhere about the old quarter, no doubt."

"Ah, well, I am sorry for him, poor devil. Good-night. Shall see you again before long." And with that the earl made a rush for his carriage.

Next day he wrote to Clement, asking him to hunt up Pilcher's address. A week later "poor Pilcher" received by post a twenty-pound note simply endorsed, "From a friend."

CHAPTER XIV.

“TWELVE IT IS.”

WE must now go back a little space in our history.

When Lord Loughton, on the occasion of his first dinner at Bourbon House, was introduced to Miss Tebbuts, the aunt of Mr. Larkins, he did not forget what he had been told respecting that lady. “Well—close said she was thirty-six, but she looks at least half a dozen years older than that,” muttered the earl to himself. “But twenty thousand pounds can gild with youth and beauty a demoiselle of even that mature age.” And his lordship became at once very attentive to Miss Tebbuts.

Hannah Tebbuts was sister to Orlando’s mother. In conjunction with another sister, also unmarried, she had for several years kept a select seminary for young ladies in a little town in one of the midland counties. When her sister married Mr. Larkins that gentleman had not risen to fame and fortune. He was still brooding over the Pill that was ultimately to make his name known to the ends of the earth. Even then Hannah Tebbuts saw but little of her married sister, and she saw still less of her when Mrs. Larkins went to live in a big mansion in the outskirts of London.

By and by Mrs. Larkins died, and after that a dozen

years passed away without Miss Hannah catching even a passing glimpse of her rich relations in London. But at the end of that time there came a message for her to go up to town with the least possible delay. Her famous brother-in-law was dangerously ill, and he had asked that she might be sent for to go and nurse him. Miss Hannah was less loath to go because she had lately lost the sister with whom she had lived for so many years, and had, in consequence, given up her school. Once in London, there she remained till Mr. Larkins died. His illness was a long and tedious one, but through it all Miss Hannah nursed her brother-in-law with the most devoted care and attention. As a reward for her services, and a token of the high esteem in which he held her, the sick man, by a codicil added to his will only a few days before his death, bequeathed to her the very handsome legacy of twenty thousand pounds.

Never was a simple-minded woman more puzzled what to do with a legacy. Her tastes were so inexpensive, and her mode of life so quiet and sedate, that she could find no use for the money. All she could do was to place the amount in the hands of her nephew, begging him to allow her a hundred a year out of it, and invest the remainder for her in any way he might think best.

Miss Tebbuts had never been handsome, but no one who studied her face could doubt her amiability and good-temper. There was nothing fashionable, nothing modish, about her. Her gown was after a style that had been in vogue some dozen years previously. She wore elaborate caps, and little sausage-

like curls, now beginning to turn gray. She was of a retiring disposition, and her greatest trouble was having to fill the position of hostess at Bourbon House to the numerous strangers her nephew took there. Mr. Wellclose was wrong when he surmised that she might possibly be the victim of some early disappointment. Miss Tebbuts had never had an offer in her life, and if she had ever entertained any hopes in that direction she had trampled them under foot long ago, so that nothing was now left of them save a faint, sweet memory, like the sweetness of crushed flowers exhaled from a *pot pourri*. And this was the lady to whom John Marmaduke Lorimore began to pay very marked attention.

He sat next her at the dinner-table, he made his way to her side in the drawing-room, and he favored her with more of his conversation than any one else. After a little while he began to call two or three times a week and take her for drives in the basket-carriage, with little Mabel Larkins to play propriety. He was seen with her at the Brimley spring flower-show, and at the garden-party, of which mention has already been made, his attentions to her were the theme of public comment. In short, people began to talk in all directions, and before long everybody knew for a fact, or thought they did, that the earl and Miss Tebbuts were going to make a match of it. This notoriety was just what the earl wanted. On one point he was particularly careful: he never spoke a word of love to Miss Tebbuts, nor gave utterance to any sentiments that could possibly be construed into the faintest shadow of a declaration.

One day Orlando said, smilingly, "If you play your cards properly, aunt, you may yet be Countess of Loughton."

Miss Tebbuts colored up. "But I don't want to be Countess of Loughton," she said, "and you don't know what you are talking about. Make your mind easy on one point: Lord Loughton and I will never be more than friends."

"Such attentions as his can have but one meaning."

"You talk like a very young man, Orlando. According to your theory, no gentleman can pay a lady a few simple attentions without having certain designs imputed to him."

"A few simple attentions, aunt! Pardon me, but they seem to me most marked attentions."

"Well, whatever they may seem, they won't end in matrimony; on that point you may make yourself quite sure."

Orlando was terribly disappointed, but did not dare to show it. What a splendid thing it would have been to have an aunt who was a countess and an uncle who was an earl! Such a dream was almost too blissful to contemplate. And yet he firmly believed it might become a glorious reality if only his aunt were not so foolishly weak-minded. If she did not care greatly for such a marriage on her own account, she ought to remember what was due to her nephew and nieces. Never could they hope that such an opportunity would offer itself again.

One day the earl was surprised by a visit from the dowager countess, or, rather, he was not surprised.

He had quite expected to see her before long. Certain rumors had reached her ears, and she had driven over from Ringwood to satisfy herself as to their truth or falsity. Mr. Flicker was with her, as monumentally severe as ever.

The countess had not seen Lord Loughton since his transformation. She remembered him as a shabby, buttoned-up individual, with long straggling hair, and patched boots, and a generally mouldy and decayed appearance, who was known to the world as "Mr. Fildew." She saw before her a good-looking, well-preserved, elderly gentleman, clean shaved and carefully dressed, and of a spruce and military aspect. This personage called himself Lord Loughton, and the countess recognized at once his likeness to certain traditional types of the Lorrimore family. So far she was gratified. It was evident that the new earl was not likely to prove such a discredit to his connections as had at one time seemed but too probable.

"Welcome to Laurel Cottage, aunt," said the earl, as he assisted her ladyship to alight. "I thought I should have had the pleasure of seeing you here long ago."

The countess vouchsafed no word in reply, but glanced round at the house and the grounds, and then, turning to Flicker, she said, "Quite a little paradise."

"But without a peri to do the honors of it," remarked the earl, with a chuckle and a tug at his mustache.

"Ah, I'm coming to that part of the business

presently," said the dowager, in her most acidulated tones. "And now, have you a place, where I can sit down?"

The earl led the way into his little sitting-room. The countess followed him, and Mr. Flicker brought up the rear. The countess seated herself on an ottoman, and, putting up her glasses, took a quiet survey of the room. "Rather different from the sort of home you have been used to of late years—eh?" she said, sharply.

"Yes, for an earl I can't say that I'm badly lodged," sneered her nephew.

"You are lodged far beyond your deserts, sir, I do not doubt."

"The Lorrimore family have generally been fortunate in that respect."

"I did not come here to bandy personalities with you." The earl bowed. "I came in consequence of a certain rumor that has reached my ears." The dowager paused, but apparently the earl had nothing to say. He was stroking his chin, and gazing through his glass at a Parian Venus bracketed on the opposite wall.

"A most absurd rumor," continued the countess, with added asperity, "but one, nevertheless, that I feel called upon to investigate. May I ask you, sir, whether it is true that you are going to be married to a creature of the name of—of—what is the creature's name, Mr. Flicker?"

"Tebbutts, my lady. Hannah Tebbutts."

"Just so. Tebbutts. I knew it was some horrid word. Pray, sir, is there any foundation for the rumor in question?"

The earl withdrew his gaze from the Venus, and, producing his handkerchief, he began to polish his eye-glass with slow elaboration. "May I ask, madam, by whose authority I, a man fifty-three years old, am catechised as though I were a schoolboy caught *in delicto*?"

The countess fairly gasped for breath. Mr. Flicker raised his hands and turned up his eyes till nothing but the dingy whites of them were visible. "Catechise you, indeed! I am here, sir, because I want to know the truth, and the truth I must have," said the ruffled countess. "If this rumor be correct, you have been obtaining money under false pretences, and acting as no honorable man would act."

The earl had actually the audacity to lean back in his chair and laugh. "Really, aunt," he said, "you amuse me. A little more, and your language would be actionable. Nobody could tell you better than Mr. Flicker here that, even if I were to marry to-morrow, I should not be doing that which you assert I should be. The agreement between us was that I was to be paid a certain quarterly stipend as long as I remained unmarried. There was no absolute promise on my part that I would never marry. But the moment I do marry, if I ever do, the stipend will cease. Where are the false pretences that your ladyship accuses me of?"

For a few moments the dowager could not speak. Then she said—and her head by this time was nodding portentously—"I always asserted from the first that you were nothing better than a—a—"

"Common swindler, madam," remarked the earl,

pleasantly. "You always did say so. I give you credit for that much. But I remember also that long ago your epithets were more remarkable for their vigor than for their accuracy. Consequently, I have learned to appraise them at their proper value."

"This man is insufferable," exclaimed the countess. Mr. Flicker tried to look sympathetic, but only succeeded in looking a little more miserable than before. "May I ask you, sir, to give me a plain answer to a plain question? Is it, or is it not, your intention to marry?"

"Now we are becoming business-like, which is much better than being personal," said the earl, placably. "A straightforward question deserves a straightforward answer. I have no present intention of getting married; but still, more remote contingencies than that have come to pass in the history of the world."

"A—h! then it is true that this creature has designs on you."

"If by 'this creature' your ladyship means Miss Tebbuts, I say emphatically no. Allow me to add that Miss Tebbuts is a lady, and incapable of forming designs against any man."

"A lady, forsooth! Her father, or her brother, or somebody connected with her, was a common quack."

"Her brother-in-law created a pill and made a fortune. Had he been a great captain, and killed ten thousand men, a grateful nation would have erected a statue to him; but seeing that he only invented a pill, and probably saved ten thousand lives, society votes him vulgar, and passes him by on the

other side. What a strange, topsy-turvy state of things we have got to at the end of our nineteen centuries of practical religion!"

The countess looked mutely at Flicker, but her look plainly said, "Surely this fellow must be crazy." Mr. Flicker responded by a melancholy shake of the head. "Are we to infer from this rigmarole, sir, that the report is nothing more than a foolish *canard*, and that you have no more intention of getting married than I have?"

"Well, I will hardly venture to go as far as that. You see, aunt, Miss Tebbuts is a very charming lady, and her charms are enhanced by a fortune of twenty thousand pounds. At five per cent. that fortune would yield an annual income of one thousand pounds."

"Yes, but there would be two of you to keep out of it. As the case stands now, you have six hundred a year, and only yourself to keep."

"I assure your ladyship that Miss Tebbuts's tastes are of the most simple and inexpensive kind. She is one of those admirable women who would live on a hundred a year and save fifty of it."

"Have you no more respect for your family, sir, than to marry a quack doctor's sister?"

"Have my family no more respect for me than, out of an aggregate income of twenty thousand a year, to expect me to live on, and be satisfied with, a paltry six hundred? Are you aware, madam, that the Earl of Loughton's boots let water in, and that he hasn't enough money in his purse to pay for a pair of new ones?"

“So, sir, we are getting at your motives by degrees. You threaten us with this marriage unless we agree to buy you off.”

The earl laughed silently. “I threaten you with nothing; I merely put before you a plain statement of facts, and leave you to draw what inference you please. Remember, pray, that it is you who have come to me and not I who have appealed to you. Take back your six hundred a year, madam, if it so please you; I shall not want for bread and cheese, I dare say.”

For the first time since the discussion began, Mr. Flicker now spoke. “If I remember rightly, my lord, the amount of income suggested by you at our first meeting was twelve hundred a year—just double the sum you are now in receipt of? If the family, taking into consideration all the circumstances of the case, could see their way to fall in with your first suggestion, is there not a possibility that these disquieting rumors respecting a presumptive matrimonial alliance might prove to be without the slightest foundation in fact?”

“In other words, Flicker, would not a golden bullet bring down this *canard* at once and forever?”

The ghost of a smile flitted across the lawyer's hard-set face. “My meaning precisely, my lord.”

“Well, golden bullets are wonderful things, and really, now I come to think of it, I shouldn't be surprised if, in the present case, one of them, properly aimed, were to have the effect hinted at by you.”

The countess glowered at the lawyer as though she could scarcely believe the evidence of her ears.

"Mr. Flicker," she said, in her most imperious way, "may I ask by whose authority you have dared even to hint at a course which, if carried out, would be a disgrace to everybody concerned?"

"My lord," said Mr. Flicker, turning to the earl, "may I take the liberty of asking to be permitted to have five minutes' private conversation with her ladyship?"

"Certainly, Flicker, certainly. I'll go and have a cigarette in the garden. Touch the bell and send the servant for me when you are ready." And with that the earl strolled leisurely out. As he was shutting the door he heard the countess say with much emphasis, "That man will be the death of me."

At the end of ten minutes a servant came in search of him. He found the lawyer alone. "What has become of her ladyship?" he asked.

"She has gone to her carriage. She is a great age, and the interview has somewhat tried her strength. I have, however, much pleasure in informing your lordship that—that, in fact—"

"That our wild duck is to be shot with a golden bullet after all. Is not that so?"

"It is so, my lord."

"Twelve?"

"Twelve it is, my lord. After this, I presume we need not disquiet ourselves in the least as to any matrimonial intentions on the part of your lordship?"

"Not in the least, Flicker. I give you my word of honor on that score. As I said once before, I am not a marrying man, and am in no want of a wife."

Mr. Flicker rose and pushed back his chair. "We are quite prepared to take your lordship's word in the matter. I shall have the honor of forwarding you a check as soon as I get back to town."

The earl expressed his thanks, and was going with Flicker to the door when the latter said, "Pardon me, my lord, but I think it would be as well not to let the countess see you again to-day. There is a tendency to irritation of the nervous system, and I am afraid that your presence would hardly act as a sedative."

The earl laughed. "Perhaps you are right," he said. "Anyhow, give my love to her, and tell her that I hope to visit her before long at Ringwood."

Mr. Flicker shook his head, as implying that he knew better than to deliver any such message. Then the earl shook hands with him, and they parted.

CHAPTER XV.

CECILIA PHILOSOPHIZES.

THE courtship of Cecilia Collumpton and Clement Fildew progressed as such affairs generally do progress. Each of their meetings was looked forward to as an event of immense importance, for the time being quite dwarfing into insignificance all other occupations and engagements. Between times they seemed to think of little or nothing but what they had said to each other at their last meeting, and what might possibly be said at their next. They met twice a week, sometimes for an hour only, sometimes for a whole delicious evening. Oftener than that Cecilia could not have got away from home without exciting her aunt's suspicions. Miss Browne was now back at Cadogan Place. She usually accompanied her friend to the trysting-place, which was the corner of a quiet street leading out of a certain crescent, and then, after walking with the pair of lovers for a short distance, she would leave them and go back home. Clement, of course, still believed that Cecilia was Mora and Mora Cecilia. Miss Browne often implored her friend to undeceive Mr. Fildew, but Cecilia had gone too far to retreat. "Not till the very day he goes to Doctors' Commons will I tell him," she said; "it is too sweet to me to feel

that I am loved for myself and not for my money to allow of my undeceiving him till the last moment. He believes that I have not twenty sovereigns in the world, and when I'm with him I try to fancy that I haven't. I make believe to myself that I am as poor as a church mouse."

"Ah, it may be pleasant to play at being poor, just as children play at being soldiers," said Mora, "but there's nothing pleasant about the reality."

The two portraits were finished by this time, as were also the two Academy pictures—Clem's and Tony Macer's—and the pair of them sent in. Then ensued a period of suspense before it was known what their fate would be.

It was about this time that Lord Loughton's first visit to his wife took place. Clem forbore to say anything to his father about his love-affairs, and also begged his mother to keep her own counsel in the matter. He did not want to provoke any opposition from his father, which a knowledge of his engagement probably would have done. Silence was best till the wedding should be close at hand. Meanwhile Cecilia took tea with Mrs. Fildew once a week.

Clem knew nothing about the long talks and discussions that took place in his absence, chiefly concerning housewifery and the best mode of making a small income go as far as possible. He did not know, and he would have blushed if he had known, how often he himself formed the topic of conversation on such occasions. To both these loving hearts, one young and one old, he was the dearest object on earth; why, then, should they not talk about him?

All Clem knew was that they seemed to agree together remarkably well. His mother sometimes told him jokingly that Cecilia was far too good for him, far beyond his deserts; and Cecilia often asseverated that she only tolerated him for the sake of darling Mrs. Fildew.

By and by came pleasant news. Both Mr. Macer's picture and Clem's were accepted at the Academy. As soon as Cecilia heard this she went to a dealer with whom she had had some previous transactions, and instructed him to go on the private-view day and buy the two pictures for her in his own name. Clem pressed her to go with him on the opening-day, but, knowing that her aunt would almost certainly be there, as well as a number of her acquaintances, she put her lover off till later in the week. Clem resolutely refused to go without her. He heard that his picture was sold, for news of that kind soon finds its way to the studios; but thinking to afford Cecilia a pleasant surprise, he said nothing to her about it. On the fourth day they went together. Cecilia, feeling sure there would be several people there whom she knew, was very plainly dressed and wore a veil. She would fain have hurried off to the picture the moment she entered the building, but Clem, catalogue in hand, persisted in going to work in the orthodox way.

When, at length, they did reach it, they found quite a little crowd of people in front of it. Cecilia pressed her lover's arm. "Whether the critics appreciate your picture or not, it is quite evident that the general public do," she whispered.

"It would be the general public who would appreciate me if I were to grin through a horse-collar at a fair," whispered Clem in return.

"Is not *that* the truest test of appreciation?" asked Cecilia, pointing with brightened eyes and glowing cheeks to the tiny ticket stuck in the frame. For the first time since entering the building she had now thrown back her veil. Clem thought he had never seen her look so lovely as at that moment.

"You see, dear, there are still a few people in the world with more money than brains," he said, quietly. "What would become of us poor painters if Providence had not kindly arranged matters so?"

"I wonder what your secret admirer would say if he could hear you giving utterance to such heresies."

"Were my secret admirer here I would thank him for one thing, if for no other."

"May I ask what the one thing is that you would thank him for?"

"For enabling me, by the purchase of my picture, to get married at midsummer. Bless him for a good man!"

As Cecilia said afterwards to Mora, "I was struck dumb. All that I could do was to let my veil drop and move on. When I instructed Checkly to buy the pictures for me, I never dreamed that from a cause so simple an event so dire would spring. Perhaps it is fortunate for us that we can so rarely foresee all the consequences of our actions."

"Supposing for a moment," said Mora, slyly, "that the gift of foreknowledge had been yours in

this case, would you or would you not have bought the picture?"

Cecilia gazed silently out of the window for a few moments. "I don't know what I should have done," she said at last. "I certainly object to being married at midsummer, but, on the other hand, if Clem's picture had not been sold, what a disappointment it would have been to him."

"But what a surprise when he finds out who the purchaser is!"

"That he shall never find out till we are married, not if it's a dozen years first. Well, we went next and looked at Mr. Macer's picture. I verily believe that Clement was far better pleased that his friend's work should have found a purchaser than that his own had. Anyhow, he was in such high spirits that when we left the Academy he insisted on our having a hansom and going to look at two empty houses that he had seen advertised in one of the newspapers. One of the houses was at Haverstock Hill, the other at Camden Town; suburbs of London, both of them, hitherto known to me only by name. The rent of both houses was the same—sixty pounds a year. I told Clement that I thought we could do with a house at a much less rent than that, and begged of him not to go beyond his means."

"Gracious me, Cecilia, how could you?"

"Oh, it was great fun. After seeing the houses we drove to a furniture emporium, and there, after due deliberation, I chose a pattern for our drawing-room suite: a pale-blue figured silk, with a narrow black stripe running through it, my dear Mora, and the price twenty-five guineas."

“How could you let Mr. Fildew go to such an expense?”

“Shall I not make it up to him a thousandfold one of these days? The day before yesterday we bought a lot more things—carpets, china, what not. I can’t tell you how delightful it is to go about in this way, and not finally fix on anything till you feel sure that you can really afford it. Poor people must value their homes far more than rich people can. They have had to work and think and contrive, and get their things together an article or two at a time, as they could spare the money. We well-to-do people give *carte blanche* to a firm, and our mansion is fitted up from garret to basement almost without our having a voice in the matter. In many ways it is better to be poor than rich, and this is one of them.”

“What a pity it is, my dear Cis, that Providence did not make you a governess at sixty guineas a year, or a curate’s wife at a hundred and fifty.”

“In either case I should have led a much more useful existence than I do now. Which reminds me that as I was parting from Clement last evening he put a sealed envelope into my hands, with a request that I would not open it till I was alone. You would never guess what was inside: a twenty-pound note towards my wedding outfit.”

“Oh, Cecilia!”

“Of course there were a few words with it. He said he felt sure that out of my small income it was impossible for me to have saved more than a trifle, and, as I had no parents to fall back upon, would I

make him happy by accepting the enclosure to buy my wedding dress with. What a dear fellow he is! I hope to be able to keep that note unchanged as long as I live. Perhaps you think I ought not to have accepted it?"

"I hardly know what to think," answered Miss Browne. "Certainly, to accept money, even from the gentleman to whom one is engaged, seems—"

"Very shocking, does it not, to us, with our petty conventional notions? If the money were offered in the shape of a bracelet, that would make all the difference. But here am I, a poor girl about to be married, who cannot afford to buy her wedding-gown. My sweetheart offers me money to buy it with. Am I to be so nonsensical, so stuffed up with silly pride, as to refuse his offer, and say, 'If you can't marry me in my old dress, you sha'n't marry me at all'? I think I have acted as a sensible girl would act under such circumstances. Anyhow, I mean to keep that note."

CHAPTER XVI.

PALLIDA MORS.

As Lord Loughton became more familiarized with his fresh mode of life, and as the novelty which waits upon all things new gradually wore itself away, there came times and seasons when he was at a loss how to get through the day with that degree of satisfaction to himself which, as an elderly man of the world, he thought he had a right to expect. He found the morning hours—say, from ten till four—hang the most heavily on his hands. Some men would have stayed in bed till noon, have lounged over breakfast till two o'clock, and have made their cigar and newspaper last them well on into the afternoon. But the earl had never been used to lying late in bed, and he felt no inclination to begin the practice now. Besides which, that ever-increasing tendency to corpulence had to be fought against in various ways. His medical adviser told him that, in addition to the riding exercise which he took, he ought to take more exercise on foot. But the earl detested walking along the dull country roads. To have them, and them alone, to ride and drive on was bad enough, while everybody else was enjoying the delights of town, but to be condemned to trudge along them on foot, as though he were a

pedlar or a tramp, was more than he was prepared to endure. He would have given much to be able to go up to London for a few weeks during the season, and take up that position in society to which his rank entitled him. But he durst not venture on a step so hazardous. Too many people in London knew him as Mr. Fildew to allow of its being safe for him to appear there as Lord Loughton. Perhaps one of the first people whom he might chance to meet in the Row or in Piccadilly would be his own son. He knew well that if the faintest suspicion of his having a son, or even of his being married, were to reach the ears of the dowager countess, he might say farewell forever to his twelve hundred a year. Evidently the game was not worth the candle. Evidently the risk he would run by such a step was far too great to be rashly incurred. His periodical journeys to London to see his wife were another thing. They could be made without much risk of discovery. He arrived at dusk and departed at dusk, and hardly stirred out of doors during his stay.

The earl was not a reading man. Sometimes on a Sunday he would skim through a few pages of *Blackwood* or *The Quarterly* (they were good, old-fashioned periodicals to have lying about when anybody called), till drowsiness crept over him, and the thread of what he had been reading became entangled in the webs of sleep. But on weekdays he rarely read anything except the *Times*. Of that he was a diligent student, his maxim being that a man may pick enough out of his newspaper to enable him to hold his own in almost any company. Most people said,

“What a well-informed man the Earl of Loughton seems to be.” It was simply that he had the knack of presenting other people’s ideas from his own point of view, and thereby giving them a gloss of originality which only one person here or there was clever enough to see through. But he seldom originated ideas of his own.

But even when the *Times* had been conscientiously waded through, several hours were still left before dinner. He could not go out every day riding on Mr. Larkins’s hack, or driving about the country with Miss Tebbuts and the young ladies. The attractions of Brimley were of a very limited character, and the nearest town of any consequence was a dozen miles away. Now and then there was a flower-show, or a picnic, or an archery meeting, to break the monotony of country life; but such excitements were few and far between. Sometimes the earl, in dressing-gown and smoking-cap, would potter about his garden for an hour or two, and simulate an interest he was far from feeling in the prospects of his wall-fruit or the progress of his marrowfats. Oh, for the glories of Piccadilly or Regent Street, on a warm spring afternoon! The life, the brightness, the gay shops, the well-watered streets, the sunny pavement, the ever-changing panorama—with a sovereign in one’s pocket, and no social obligations to deter one from slaking one’s thirst as often as one might feel inclined to do so!

When once the time to dress for dinner was reached the earl was himself again. He rarely dined at home more than once or twice a week. When such a con-

tingency did happen, he generally walked into the town, and found his way in the course of the evening to the billiard-room at the George. It was a private subscription table, but his lordship was always made welcome. It was not every day that the small gentry of Brimley had the privilege of playing billiards with an earl, and such opportunities were made the most of. Indeed, they never thought of begrudging their half-crowns, of which his lordship generally took half a pocketful back home with him, for he was rather a fine player when he chose to put forth his strength, and none of the Brimley amateurs were a match for him.

Still, life at Laurel Cottage sometimes grew rather monotonous, as, indeed, it well might do to a man who had been a confirmed *flâneur* for years. Often of a night the earl longed for the jolly company of the Brown Bear. As a rule the Brimley magnates were intensely sedate and decorous, whereas the earl had Bohemian proclivities which not even the gray hairs of middle life had power to eradicate. A jorum of toddy and a long pipe, with a congenial companion, had far more attractions for him than the Clicquot and hot-house fruit of smug-faced respectability. Alas! in all Brimley he could find no companion who would say *Bo* to his goose—no one who would forget that there were such people as earls, who, if needs were, would contradict him to his face, and to whom such phrases as “Yes, my lord,” and “No, my lord,” were absolutely unknown.

One morning, while Lord Loughton was dawdling over his breakfast, a brougham drove up to Laurel

Cottage, from which three gentlemen alighted. Only one of the three proved to be known to the earl. He was a certain Mr. Wingfield, a retired merchant of ample means, whom he had met once or twice at dinner. Mr. Wingfield, after introducing his two companions, proceeded to state the object of his visit, which was neither more nor less than to solicit his lordship to become chairman of the new line of railway between Brimley and Highcliffe. The line was near completion, and the opening was to take place some time in July. "Our late chairman died last week," said Mr. Wingfield, "and we want a good name to fill up the vacancy."

"But I know nothing whatever about rail management," urged the earl.

"That's of no consequence whatever," answered Mr. Wingfield. "We understand it, and I am the vice-chairman, so that your lordship will be well supported. At present we meet for two hours twice a week. After each meeting we have luncheon. The chairman's honorarium, as fixed at present, is two hundred guineas a year."

"But before accepting such a position would it not be requisite that I should qualify myself by holding a certain number of shares in the company?"

"If your lordship will leave that little matter to me and my colleagues, we will take steps to have you duly qualified."

"In that case you may make use of my name in any way you think proper."

The earl took to his new duties *con amore*. His two visits per week to the Brimley board-room en-

abled him to get through a couple of mornings very pleasantly without interfering with the after-part of the day. Then the luncheon with which each meeting broke up was by no means to be despised. More than all, the check for a hundred guineas, which was to come to him every half-year, would form a very welcome addition to his limited income.

His position as chairman of the railway board brought Lord Loughton into contact with a number of well-to-do people, connected more or less with trade, who thought it a great thing to be hand-and-glove with an earl. His lordship was always affable to men who gave good dinners, and the consequence was that he was now less at home than ever. Mr. Wingfield had a brother in the City who was well known as a promoter and launcher of new companies. Before long an offer was made to the earl to become chairman to two new schemes that were on the eve of being floated. The duties were light—to meet the board twice a month for a couple of hours—the honorarium liberal, and the liability in case of disaster next to nothing. The earl closed with the offer at once. It is true that his visits to the City would involve a certain degree of risk, but he was quite prepared to face it. Even if some old acquaintances should chance to meet him as he was being whirled past them in a cab, it did not of necessity follow that they should know him as any other than Mr. Fildew. And then, as Wingfield had assured him more than once, his connection with the City was sure to bring under his notice some of the “good things” that were always going about on the

quiet, to participate in which the leverage of a little capital was all that was needed. That capital he was determined by hook or by crook to obtain. Old as he was, there was still time for him to lay the foundation of an ample fortune before he died. Clem should be no pauper peer, dependent on the bounty of relatives for his daily bread.

These golden dreams were interrupted for a time by the news of his wife's serious illness, and the necessity for his immediate presence in London. The letter conveying the news had been lying for three days at the Shallowford post-office when he called there. He hurried off at once, but when he reached Soho he found that had he stayed away another day he would probably have been too late.

"Why, Kitty, my dear, what is this?" he said, as he stooped over the bed and kissed his wife's white face. There was a tremor in his voice that sounded as strange to himself as it could possibly have done to any one else. Now that the end was so near, old chords, the existence of which he had forgotten, began to vibrate again in his heart; countless memories burst through the crust of years, and bloomed again for a little while with the fragrance of long ago. Now that his treasure was about to be taken from him he began to realize its value as he had never realized it before.

"This means, John, dear, that my summons to go has come at last—the summons I have waited for, oh! so wearily." She pressed his hand to her lips and then nestled it softly against her cheek.

"It's these confounded east winds," said the earl,

huskily. "They are enough to lay anybody by the heels. When the warm weather sets in you'll soon be all right again."

"Not in this world, darling. Perhaps in the next. I began to be afraid that you would not be here in time for me to see you," she added, presently. "It would have seemed very hard to die and you not by my side."

"I came as soon as the letter reached me. I—I had been from home, and the letter was waiting for me on my return."

"I knew that you would come, dear, as soon as possible, and now that you are here I am quite happy. I told Moggy to put a steak on the fire the moment she heard you knock. I am sure you must be hungry after your long journey."

Later on in the evening, when they were alone, the sick woman said to her husband—and by this time her voice was very weak and uncertain—"I have been thinking a great deal about our wedding-day this afternoon. Why, I cannot tell. When I was lying half asleep just now, every little incident came back to me as freshly as though they only dated from yesterday, even to the smell of the musk-roses on the breakfast-table. And then I remembered something that I have hardly thought of for years. I remembered that your name is not John Fildew, but John Marmaduke Lorrimore. You told me never to mention that name to any one, and I never have—not even to Clement. You told me never to ask you any questions about it, and I never have. But you told me also that some day, and of your own

accord, you would reveal to me the reasons that had compelled you to change your name. A woman's curiosity is one of the last things to leave her. It is not too late, dear, to tell me now."

The earl mused for a moment. The doctor had told him that it was quite impossible for his wife to live, consequently no valid reason existed why he should not tell her everything. "I changed my name," he said, "because when I was young and foolish I did something that disgraced both my friends and myself. Not a crime, mind you; in fact, nothing more heinous than incurring debts of honor which I was totally unable to meet. That was bad enough in all conscience, but I was young and sensitive in those days, and probably felt things more keenly than I should now. Anyhow, I thought that in a new country, and under a new name, I could bury the past, and perhaps do wonders in the future. Then I met you, dear, and you know the rest. Only I have never done the wonders I intended to do."

"You have been the best and dearest husband in the world." The earl winced, and shook his head in mild dissent. "But what a pity that after all these years you are not able to resume your own proper name and station in the world."

"I hope to be able to do so before long. Death has made strange havoc among the Lorrimores of late years, and your husband is now the head of the family."

"I have always said that you were a gentleman bred and born."

"And you are a lady, Kitty—if not by birth at

least by merit and by rank. If the world knew you by your proper title it would call you Countess of Loughton."

The sick woman stared at her husband as though unable to take in the meaning of his words. "I am the Earl of Loughton, Kitty, and you are my countess," he said. "The thing is simple enough."

"You tell me this and I am dying!" she said, after a minute's silence. "It is of little use to tell me now."

"The time was not ripe for you to be told before. Nor has the time yet come to tell it to the world."

"And Clement?"

"He knows nothing, and at present it would not be wise to tell him. It would only unsettle his mind and do him harm instead of good. When the proper time comes he will be told everything. At present I am working both for his interests and my own. A pretty thing it would be thought that Lord Shoreham, the son of the Earl of Loughton, should have to paint pictures for his bread and cheese! He had far better go on painting them as 'Clement Fildew' till he can afford to give up painting altogether."

"My dear boy a lord! It seems all a strange, foolish dream."

"It is a very simple reality. Clement is Lord Shoreham as surely as I am sitting by your side. But of this he must know nothing for some time to come."

"And I am Countess of Loughton! How wonderful it seems! But I could not have loved you more than I have had I known this all along. Perhaps I

should not have loved you so much. God is good, and he orders everything for the best. I have been very happy, and the queen on her throne can't be more than that."

She closed her eyes and lay silent a little while, thinking over what she had just heard. "John, dear," she said after a time, "if you ever put a stone over my grave, will you say on it, 'Here lies Catharine, Countess of Loughton,' or will you say, 'Here lies Kitty, wife of John Fildew'?"

"Why do you talk of such things? I hope and trust you will be with us for many a day to come."

"You know better than that, dear. My time is very short now. But I think I should like to have my real name on my tombstone—if my real name is what you tell me."

"It is your real name, and everything shall be as you wish."

A smile of satisfaction crept over the dying woman's face. "I think I can sleep a little now," she said, "and you must be tired, sitting here so long. There's your Turkish pipe in the cupboard downstairs, and I told Moggy to have some of your favorite mixture in readiness for you."

Mrs. Fildew died the following afternoon. She sank into a sleep as calm as that of an infant, and did not wake again. Her husband and son were with her at the last. Cecilia had seen her two days before the earl's arrival. "It is not half such a trouble to leave my boy as I thought it would be," Mrs. Fildew said to her. "I know that you and he love each other, and that I leave him in the best of

hands. Don't worry your mind about the house-keeping, dear—you will have servants to do all that for you. Clement will like to see you nicely dressed when he comes home. Those pretty hands were never made to be spoiled by pickles and preserves."

The earl buried his wife under the name she had so long been known by. To have made use of any other would have led to questions which as yet he was not prepared to meet. "By and by, when I put up the tombstone, the world shall know her by her proper name and title, but not now—not now." To his son's surprise he bought a private lot in one of the cemeteries, and had an expensive bricked grave made. The cost seemed to be no object to him. Clem wondered, but said nothing. On the evening of the day after the funeral the earl bade farewell to his son for a little while, and went back to Laurel Cottage.

CHAPTER XVII.

GOLDEN DREAMS.

It was impossible for Lord Loughton to wear deep mourning for his wife without provoking sundry inconvenient inquiries, so he simply put a narrow band round his hat, and wore gloves stitched with black. "I've lost an old and very dear friend," he remarked, incidentally, here and there. "Some one I knew when I was abroad many years ago. Quite cut me up to hear that he was gone."

Over the solitary pipe in which he indulged the last thing before going to bed he often found his thoughts wandering off in the direction of Miss Tebbutts. Here were twenty thousand pounds ready to drop into his hands; for, without self-flattery, in which, to do him justice, he rarely indulged, he fully believed that if he were to ask the lady to become Countess of Loughton he need not fear a refusal. It was true, he had promised Flicker that in consideration of his augmented income all thoughts of matrimony should be banished from his mind. But circumstances when he made that promise were different with him from what they were now, and, in any case, such a promise could hardly be held to be finally binding. Should he decide to become a Benedick once more, he would give due notice to the countess.

Everything should be fair and above-board. He often chuckled to himself when he tried to picture the dismay and rage with which the dowager would greet any notice of his impending marriage. And yet the real fun of the affair lay, not in the fact of his contracting a second marriage, but in the much more significant fact of his having a grown-up son and heir ready to his hand. What the dowager would say and do in case it ever came to her ears that there was already in existence a strapping young man of five feet eleven inches who was entitled to call himself Lord Shoreham if he only knew it, was more than even the earl could imagine. The news would almost be enough to kill her. He would be amply revenged on her for all her slights and insults one of these days.

Then again, provided he made up his mind to go on with his matrimonial scheme, it would hardly do for either Miss Tebbuts or her friends to be made aware of the existence of Clement. Were that fact to come to their ears, the twenty thousand pounds might not so readily drop into his hands. After the marriage it would not matter how soon he introduced his son to them. They might then digest their disappointment as they best could. Their feelings in the matter would be nothing to him.

His frequent conversations with money-making Mr. Wingfield tended more than anything else to direct his thoughts into the channel of matrimony. "With five thousand to start with, you ought to be worth fifty thousand at the end of five years," was one of the several maxims with which Mr. Wing-

field was in the habit of making our impecunious peer's mouth water. As a sort of corollary to the doctrine he was in the habit of preaching, the merchant on one occasion lent the earl three hundred pounds in order that the latter might participate, to an infinitesimal extent, in one of the many "good things" that seemed as plentiful as blackberries in those halcyon days of unlimited confidence. At the end of two months the earl sold out, by the advice of his friend, realizing thereby, on his original investment of three hundred pounds, a clear profit of as much more. It was no wonder that the earl began to court his City friends more and more, and that he came to find his most interesting reading in the money articles of his favorite newspaper.

One grain of justice we must do him. In all his dreams of wealth and prosperity to come he had Clement's future at heart almost as much as his own. It should not be his fault if Clement did not come into fortune as well as title. In so far he was unselfish, and no further. If only Clem would supplement his father's efforts by making a rich marriage, then would all be well. The earldom of Loughton, in the hands of the junior branch of the family, might ultimately shine with a lustre equal to that which had emanated from it in days gone by.

It was during the time these thoughts were fermenting in his mind that the earl was surprised by a visit from Miss Collumpton and Mr. Slingsby Boscombe. They had been summoned to Ringwood by the countess, who was anxious to see for herself how matters were progressing with the two young peo-

ple. When the present detestable individual who held the title should die—and surely Providence would be considerate enough to remove him before long—then Slingsby would be Earl of Loughton, and, what with his own fortune and that of Cecilia, he would be in a position to make a very respectable figure as a nobleman. The marriage of these two was the last pet scheme of the dowager's life, but we know already what small likelihood there was of its fulfilment. Cecilia and Slingsby, knowing for what purpose they had been summoned to Ringwood, agreed between themselves, before their interview with the countess, what each of them should say.

Keen-sighted as the old lady usually was, they contrived to hoodwink her most effectually. They walked and talked and sat together, and seemed full of private confidences with each other. When the countess spoke about Slingsby to Cecilia, the latter said, with a smile, "Yes, we are very good friends, are we not? I always did like Slingsby."

"But it's a question of something more than liking. You know what I mean?"

"Quite well, aunt."

"You know how I have set my heart on this matter. I hope you are not going to disappoint me."

"As I said before, aunt, Slingsby and I are the best of friends. We understand each other thoroughly; is not that enough?"

"I suppose I must make it so. But young people nowadays do their courting so frigidly that one can never tell when they are in earnest and when they are not."

It was not without certain qualms of conscience that Cecilia consented to deceive her aunt thus. It was only at Slingsby's earnest entreaty that she agreed to do so. He had committed the imprudence of a secret marriage, and was most anxious that his father should have no suspicion of the fact, otherwise his allowance would be stopped, and his wife and himself reduced for a couple of years to come to a condition of genteel pauperism.

When Cecilia and Slingsby set out from Ringwood on the morning of their visit to Laurel Cottage they had no intention of adventuring so far. It was only when they had been riding for an hour that Slingsby said, "Now that we have come so far we may as well go on to Brimley and hunt up his lordship. What say you, Cis?"

"I should like it of all things. Only, we have never been introduced to him."

"I don't suppose he will mind that in the least. We are his relations, and it's only right that we should know each other."

"Then let us go. But the dowager will be dreadfully annoyed if she hears of it."

"Who's to tell her? Not you or I."

The earl received them with much *empressement*, and made them stay to luncheon. Slingsby was greatly taken with him; the earl had always had a happy knack of making himself agreeable to young men. To Cecilia he was an enigma. There was about him a certain indefinable something which seemed familiar to her. It was not his features, nor his voice, nor his walk, nor anything on which she

could definitely fix, that put her in mind of some other person whom she had at some time met. It seemed to her rather as if she must have known the earl when she was a very little girl—though that was an impossibility—or else that she must have met him in some previous state of existence, and have not quite forgotten him in this.

“Surely these young people must abound with generous instincts,” said the earl to himself. “It would be a pity not to develop and encourage them.” So he showed them round the garden, which was really a charming little spot, and came to the stable and coach-house last of all. “I have no use for these,” said the earl, with a doleful shake of his head. “I am thinking of advertising them as being to let.”

“But is not your lordship fond of riding and driving?”

“Yes; no one more so. But then, I am a poor man. Even a hack for riding is a luxury beyond my reach.”

A meaning look passed between Cecilia and Slingsby, which the earl’s quick eyes did not fail to note.

About a fortnight later the railway people at Brimley advised the earl that a brougham and two horses had arrived at the station, and awaited his orders there. The next post brought a pretty little note from Cecilia, in which she requested, on the part of herself and Mr. Boscombe, the earl’s acceptance of a brougham and horse, together with a cob for riding. The earl smiled grimly as he read the note. “Two

good children—very,” he muttered. “I suppose they intend to make a match of it. I hope they won’t regret their generosity when they find out that there is such a person in existence as Clement Fildew Lorrimore, otherwise Lord Shoreham.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

UP A LADDER.

Now that his income had been doubled, now that he could afford to keep his brougham, now that his position as chairman of the Brimley Railroad Company, and his seats at the two other boards in London, enabled him to fill up his time with so much pleasure and profit to himself, it might reasonably have been expected that the Earl of Loughton would settle down into the comfortably padded groove in which he found himself, and tempt fortune no more. But such was not the case. There was about him a restlessness of disposition, an uneasy longing for something more than the present could give him, however sunny that present might be. And yet, strange to say, this restlessness and this longing had only developed themselves in him of late. In his old days of poverty all ambition had been crushed out of him by the hopelessness of his condition. The prospect of any change for the better had seemed so infinitesimal that he had long ago made up his mind, with a sort of dogged despair, to live and die, unknowing and unknown, as plain John Fildew, of Hayfield Street, W. C.

But now, as if by a touch of a necromancer's wand, everything had been changed, and that change had

called into existence hopes and wishes undreamed of before. A golden mirage glittered forever before his eyes. Now that he had come to mix among financial circles, he saw men on every side of him in the process of coining fortunes, and either founding families for themselves, or allying themselves by marriage—giving gold in exchange for position—to families already made. What was a paltry twelve hundred a year for a man of his rank to live on and keep up his station in the eyes of the world?—and even that would die with him. His son would have a barren title, indeed, unless he should be able to coax some heiress into becoming his wife. Instead of resting satisfied with twelve hundred a year, it seemed to the earl that he might just as well be in receipt of ten thousand a year. A few lucky speculations would do that for him. But in order to avail himself fully of such speculative opportunities he must have a certain leverage of capital to work with; and was there not a splendid lever ready to his hand in Miss Tebbuts's twenty thousand pounds? His friend Wingfield would turn twenty thousand pounds into a hundred thousand in a very short space of time. Why should not he, Lord Loughton, do the same—with Wingfield's help?

Meanwhile the railway was rapidly approaching completion, and the opening-day was already fixed. Every morning brought the earl a number of applications for appointments of various kinds. The labor of adjudicating on the merits of the different candidates was one that suited him exactly. The power of patronage is sweet to all men, and the earl

was no exception to the rule. His popularity grew daily. The new hotel that was being built near the station was to be called The Loughton Arms, and the new street was to be Lorrimore Road, while the joint names, John Marmaduke, became quite common sponsorial appellations among the infantile population of Brimley. When his lordship rode slowly through the town to his office at the railway-station, bows and smiles greeted him on every side. Everybody knew him; even the lads in the streets used to shout to each other, as soon as they caught sight of him, "Here comes the earl."

At length came the day appointed for the government inspector to go over the line. A week later brought the opening-day. The ceremony differed in nowise from that in vogue on various occasions of a similar kind. The directors and their friends, the latter consisting of several county magnates, with two or three M.P.'s, and their wives and daughters, travelled over the line by the first train—a special one—and after that the general public came with a rush. The stations at Brimley and Highcliffe were gayly decorated, and enlivened by the strains of two brass bands. There was a *déjeuner* at Highcliffe, and a dinner at the George at Brimley later on.

After dinner some of the gentlemen, of whom Lord Loughton was one, sat rather late over their wine, so that it was close upon midnight before they finally broke up. Their carriages were waiting for them at the door, the earl's brougham among the number. Just as they were lighting a last cigar on the steps of the hotel, and wishing each other good-night, they

were struck by a sudden ruddy glare in the sky no great distance away, and next minute a man rushed from a narrow turning close by, crying "Fire! fire!" at the top of his voice.

"Let us go and see the fire," said Captain Van Loo, on whom the champagne had not been without its effect.

The earl, who was probably the most sober of the party, and who had seen many big fires in London in his time, was far more inclined for going home to bed than for going anywhere else at that untimely hour; but Mr. Plume, the great contractor, had already taken one of his arms and Van Loo the other, and as the rest of the gentlemen seemed desirous of going, the earl gave way and went with them, their broughams being left in front of the hotel.

The gentlemen made rather a noisy party, but were not so far gone as not to know what they were about. Following the flying feet of the ever-growing crowd, they found themselves in a few minutes in one of the lowest streets of the town, and close to the burning house. A number of police were already there—Brimley could only boast about a dozen men all told—together with the town engine, which was too small to be of any real service in an emergency like the present one.

The sergeant on duty, recognizing the earl and his friends, made way for them to pass into the inner ring, volunteering at the same time the information that the burning house had been let out in floors to different families, that a woman who took

in mangling had rented the ground floor, and that it was in one of her rooms that the fire had originated. That the whole house was doomed any one could see at a glance; indeed, the two lower floors were partly burned out already, and every minute the exultant flames were climbing higher. It was a house of four or five stories, and had evidently at one time been inhabited by well-to-do people.

"Another half-hour and the roof will go," said Mr. Plume, regarding the affair from a contractor's point of view. "Every misfortune brings a blessing in its train. This place will have to be rebuilt by somebody, and just now trade is anything but lively."

"I suppose there's no fear, constable, of any one having been left inside the house?" queried the earl.

"Not much fear of that, my lord; the first thing we did after the alarm was to rouse the people and get them all out."

Van Loo passed his cigar-case round. "Almost as good as a firework night at the Palace," he remarked. "Another bottle or two of Heidsieck would improve the occasion vastly."

"What squirts the fire-engines are in these provincial towns," said Mr. Wingfield. "When once the flames get fairly hold they seem of no use whatever."

Flames and smoke were now issuing from all the windows except those of the top story, which peered out, like two black and sullen eyes, heedless of everything that was happening below.

Suddenly a woman, who had made her way

through the crowd by main force, appeared on the scene. Haggard and wild-eyed, with streaming hair, torn shawl, and bedraggled gown, she fell on her knees before the constable, and, seizing him by the arm, cried, in a voice that was hoarse with agony: "My child—where's my child? Has anybody seen her? Has anybody got her out of the burning house? Oh, sir, tell me where is she!"

"How old was your child, and in which room was she sleeping?" asked the policeman.

"She's three years old, and she was in bed in the top back room. Oh, sir, do tell me where she is!"

The constable called to another one, and the two held a brief conference in whispers. Then, turning to the woman, he said, "No such child as the one you speak of was found in the house. Are you sure she was there?"

"Sure! Good heavens! didn't I put her to bed with my own hands at eight o'clock, and the darling never wakes till morning! As soon as my little one was in bed I set off for my sister's at the other end of the town, who's ill, and there I've been ever since. Oh, sir, I must have my child! God has taken them all from me but her. He can't intend that she should be burned to death!"

The sergeant whispered to his companion again, who ran off to another group of policemen a little distance away, but only to return next minute, bringing word that no such child had been rescued from the burning tenement. Meanwhile word had run through the crowd that Dinah King's little girl was still in the house. The news thrilled all there as if

they had one pulse and one heart. One sharp-witted fellow, calling to his friends, ran in search of a ladder. Fortunately he had not far to go. In a very few minutes the ladder, borne on a dozen stalwart shoulders, pierced the crowd, and was reared on end so that its top rested against the sill of one of the upper windows. From the windows in a line below that one came long, flickering tongues of flame which strove to lick the ladder and wrap round its rungs as if they would fain claim it also as their prey. The lower floor had fallen in by this time, and the interior was like a glowing furnace, but the strong beams of the upper stories still held their own, although the flooring here and there was burned through, and thin snakes of flame were coiling round the doors and window-sills.

Now that the ladder was in position there was a moment's hesitation among the little crowd at the foot of it. In order to reach the topmost window it was necessary to pass the two lower ones, which were as open mouths to the furnace inside. "Let me have a try," said one of the firemen, and next moment he was climbing the ladder with nimble feet. Past the two windows he went without pause, although the heat must have been all but unbearable, and was quickly perched on the sill of the upper window and breaking away the framework with his axe. Then from the throbbing crowd came a wild cheer of encouragement. But the moment the framework was broken away dense volumes of black smoke came swirling out, and it was then seen how fallacious was the hope that the fire had not yet

made its way as far as the upper rooms. Durham, the fireman, plunged into the thick smoke, but only to struggle back to the window next minute, blinded and half stifled. Another fireman sprang to the assistance of his mate, and climbed the ladder like a lamplighter. Again a ringing cheer burst from the crowd. As soon as the second man had joined the first they disappeared together inside the room. A brief, breathless interval, and then, as the smoke cleared away a little, the two men could again be seen standing at the window—but without the child.

“The staircase is on fire and we can do nothing,” one of them shouted.

In the silence that followed the crackling of the burning rafters could plainly be heard.

The mother had been on her knees all this time, her fingers pressed to her eyes, praying audibly to Heaven to give her back her little one. She now sprang to her feet and rushed to the foot of the ladder. “Let me go!” she cried. “The fire sha’n’t keep me back! She’s the only one I’ve left, and I can’t lose her.”

It was evident that the woman was half distraught. Up the ladder she would have gone had not strong arms held her back.

“It’s no use, mistress, not a bit,” said the kindly sergeant. “If they two can’t reach the child nobody can. The poor thing’s out of its suffering by this time.”

“No—no—no!” cried the woman, passionately. “The fire hasn’t reached the little room at the back yet. My pretty one’s waiting there — waiting for

her mother to fetch her, and—O my God!—you won't let me go!"

From the midst of the little crowd of gentlemen quietly smoking their cigars Lord Loughton stepped forth and walked to the foot of the ladder. "What are you going to do, my lord?" asked Mr. Wingfield, anxiously.

"I am going to see for myself whether the child cannot be got at," answered the earl, as he proceeded to turn up the collar of his overcoat and to fix his glass in his eye.

"But it's madness—sheer madness!" urged Sir James Bence.

"If anybody could save the child the firemen could," said Mr. Plume.

"In any case I'll go and see for myself," persisted the earl.

"Let me beg of you, my lord, to listen to reason," said Mr. Wingfield, laying a hand on the earl's arm.

"Only a washerwoman's brat," said Captain Van Loo, with a shrug. "The world holds plenty more of the same breed."

The earl said no word more, but began to mount the ladder. Up he went, slowly and carefully—being no longer so young as he once had been—past the first window, past the second, with their greedy tongues of fire that strained forth to sting him. An utter silence fell upon the crowd. They all knew by this time who the third man was. Nothing could be heard save the regular beat of the engine and the subdued roar of the flames. Men's hearts throbbed faster, women's eyes brimmed with tears.

The poor despairing creature down on her knees gripped fast hold of the policeman's hand as though it were an anchor of hope, and prayed as she had never prayed before that the brave gentleman might find her one pet lamb and bring it back alive to its mother's arms.

The top was reached at last, and the firemen held out their hands and helped the new-comer into the room. Of what passed among the three men those below knew nothing, but a minute after the earl joined the others they were all lost in the smoke that filled the room. It was a time of slow agony to the waiting mother below. A thousand eyes were fixed on the little window. First one dark figure and then another could be dimly discerned for a moment, as they came for a breath of air before plunging into the smoke again.

All at once a great shout rent the sky, and the mother knew without looking up that her child was saved. "That's him in the middle—that's the earl with the child in his arms?" she heard those round her say. "Now he's given the young 'un to Jim Durham, and Jim's coming down with it first of all. That's the earl following him, and that's Frank Weber coming last."

Down they came, one after another, the foremost fireman with the child in his arms. Nothing could now restrain the mob. They swept away the thin barrier of police and crowded round the ladder, every one pressing forward to shake hands with the earl.

But the earl could not shake hands with any one.

While he was still some five or six feet from the ground a veil seemed to drop suddenly over his eyes, the strength went out of his hands and knees, and he fell backward like one dead. A hundred arms were held out to catch him. Then, and then only, it was seen how terribly he was burned.

“We must carry him to the George,” said Mr. Wingfield, sadly; “and let some one hurry for the best doctor that can be had for love or money.”

CHAPTER XIX.

P. P. C.

THE Earl of Loughton lay dying at the George Hotel, Brimley. They had not ventured to move him to Laurel Cottage. For the first day or two some hopes had been entertained of his recovery, but before long certain symptoms developed themselves which left no room for doubt as to what the final issue must be.

The dowager countess was in Scotland when she heard the news. Slingsby Boscombe read it out aloud to her at the breakfast-table. They were visiting among some family connections in the Lothians.

"It was the deed of a hero!" said Slingsby, enthusiastically, as he laid down the paper.

"It was the deed of a *ganache* who would risk his life for the sake of a nine days' notoriety," snarled the countess. "Read the two last lines again."

"The latest reports add that little or no hope seems to be entertained of the earl's recovery," repeated Slingsby, from the newspaper.

"Then it is quite possible that the earldom may be yours before you are many days older."

"Oh, Lady Loughton!"

"Why profess a regret which I cannot feel? I

tell you candidly that I hope the man won't recover. You and I must start for Brimley by the next train. Meanwhile, you had better telegraph to Mr. Flicker to meet us there."

The countess and Mr. Boscombe reached Brimley Station next forenoon, where her ladyship's carriage was awaiting their arrival. Slingsby, never having met the earl but once, had a dread of being looked upon as an intruder at such a time, and would much rather have stayed away, but the countess altogether scouted his objections, and insisted upon taking him with her; and she was certainly too old to venture on such a journey alone.

Slingsby wished most heartily that the fire had never happened. So far as he was concerned, if the earl were to die matters would be brought to a climax far sooner than was convenient for him, and his secret marriage be a secret no longer.

The first thing the countess did, after reaching the hotel, was to seek a private interview with Doctor Ward.

"A lamentable affair this, doctor," she said, extending a couple of frigid fingers, and motioning him to a chair.

"Very lamentable, indeed, madam."

"May I ask what the condition of your patient is by this time?"

The doctor did not answer in words, but gave his eyebrows and shoulders a simultaneous shrug.

"Dear me! as bad as that, eh?" The countess intended both her words and the tone in which they were spoken to be sympathetic, but the look of sat-

isfaction on her crafty old face altogether belied her intentions.

"I presume there will be no objection to my seeing your patient in the course of the day?"

"If the earl himself has no objection, madam, I can have none. Indeed, I may add that any relatives or friends who may be desirous of seeing his lordship had better be summoned with as little delay as possible."

"Except myself, his lordship has no near relatives," said the countess. "I will, of course, stay with him till all is over."

Her ladyship having disposed of a cutlet and a glass and a half of old port, and having had a forty minutes' snooze in an easy-chair, sent word in to the earl that she should like to see him if he were at liberty to receive her. The earl gave orders that she should be admitted at once.

But before this took place Lord Loughton had requested that a telegram might be despatched to Clement Fildew. It was sent in the name of the landlord of the hotel, and ran as follows: "You are wanted immediately at the George Hotel, Brimley, on a matter of life and death. Do not delay."

Clement wondered greatly at receiving such a summons, but at once prepared to obey it. The most likely solution that presented itself to him was that he was wanted to paint the portrait of some one who was *in extremis*, so he went prepared accordingly.

The countess and Mr. Boscombe had reached Brimley about one o'clock. The train Clement travelled

by was timed to reach there about 4.30. As it happened, Mr. Flicker went down by the same train.

The countess entered the dying man's room with hushed footsteps, and, going up to the side of the bed, she gazed down with steel-cold eyes at the white face upturned to meet her own. Suffering had already done much to refine and ennoble a face which at one time had lacked little on the score of manly beauty. The hard, worldly lines had been smoothed out, and with them had vanished a certain sensuous fulness of outline which of late years had developed itself more and more. But when the earl's eyes met those of the countess they lighted up with somewhat of their old gay, malicious twinkle.

"I am grieved to find you in this condition," said her ladyship.

"And I am grieved to be so found. *Mais c'est la fortune de la guerre*, and it were useless to repine. I regret that I am not in a condition to entertain your ladyship more becomingly."

"You do not suffer much pain, I hope?"

"None whatever now, and that's the deuce of it. While there was pain there was hope; now there is neither, and here I am, left in the lurch."

"While there's life one should never give up hoping."

The earl made a slight grimace.

"I know, and your ladyship, after your interview with Dr. Ward, doubtless knows, that there is but one thing now to look forward to. But I shall not be so ill-mannered as to be long a-dying."

There was silence for a little while. The countess

seated herself on a chair by the bedside. Presently the dying man said, in a musing sort of tone, "Perhaps I may fall across Cousin Charley when I get out yonder. Who knows? If we should meet, I wonder whether he will recognize me, and whether he will be sorry that he did not lend me that three thousand pounds which would have made my life such a different one. In any case I won't forget to give your ladyship's love to him."

The countess moved uneasily on her chair.

"It is possible that your ladyship and I may meet in the Elysian Fields before long," resumed the earl, speaking in a slow, calm way, very unusual with him. "Time flies, and none of us grow younger. I suppose they keep a list of the latest arrivals of persons of distinction. If they do, I shall not fail to consult it frequently, and look out for your ladyship's arrival."

"This is terrible," muttered the countess to herself. "The man is a perfect heathen."

After a little while the countess said, "If there is anything I can do for you—if there are any little wishes or commissions you would like to have attended to, I need hardly say that you may command me in any way."

"You are very kind," said the earl, and then, after a moment's pause, he added, dryly—"as you have always been. But any little wants or wishes of mine will naturally receive attention at the hands of my son, Lord Shoreham."

"Your son! Lord Shoreham!" gasped the countess, as she rose slowly to her feet, and drew herself up to her fullest height.

“Precisely so. I am expecting him every minute. I shall be happy to introduce him to your ladyship.”

Words would be powerless to express a tithe of what the dowager felt. For a little while her wrath was speechless because it was too deep for utterance. Her face looked like that of some fabled witch, with its expression of concentrated venom and suppressed rage. Her head began to wag portentously, and in a little while her tongue recovered from its temporary paralysis.

“A son, eh?” she cried, and her voice rose to a half-shriek. “So, then, you die as you have lived—a swindler to the last!”

“No missiles from your tongue, madam, can reach me now,” said the earl, with an easy smile. “I have got beyond their range. Your ladyship’s cunning has overreached itself and fallen on the other side.”

At this moment there came a tap at the door, and the head of the nurse was intruded into the room. “Mr. Clement Fildew to see your lordship,” she said, in appropriately subdued tones.

“Show him in at once,” said the earl, and next moment Clement entered the room.

He gazed around for a moment, and then his eyes fell on the pallid, sunken face on the pillow. “Father! you here!” he cried, striding to the bedside. “They told me that I was wanted by the Earl of Loughton.”

“I am the Earl of Loughton, and this”—turning to the countess—“is my son, Clement Fildew Lorrimore, otherwise Lord Shoreham.”

The countess stared for a moment or two into the young man's bright, handsome face, and then her hands grasped the bed as if to support herself. Turning to the earl with a grin of fiendish spite that showed the whole range of her artificial teeth, she shook a yellow claw in his face, and then, with many strange noises and gurglings under her breath, she tottered slowly from the room.

Ten minutes later her horses' shoes struck fire from the pavement of the inn yard as they started on their journey to Ringwood, carrying with them the dowager, Mr. Boscombe, and Mr. Flicker, the latter of whom, for once, came in for a terrible wiggling from her ladyship, for having omitted to find out that "that wretched creature" had a son in hiding.

Father and son remained closeted together for upwards of an hour. Then Clement came out and summoned the nurse. The earl was tired and wanted to sleep. Clement took his hat and went for a long walk. Time and solitude were needed to enable him to familiarize his mind in some degree with the astounding news that had just been told him. Later in the day the earl sent for him again.

"In a tin box," he said, "labelled with my name, and deposited at Mellish's bank, you will find all the documents necessary to enable you to prove your identity, which the other side will no doubt compel you to do before admitting your right to the title. Wellclose has instructions with respect to my will, and he will bring it in the morning to be signed and witnessed. It's not much that I have to leave you,

my boy—more's the pity. Merely a few paltry hundreds, the result of one or two lucky speculations. Yours will be a barren title indeed. But if you are a wise man you will speedily alter that state of things. You will give up painting, of course. Who ever heard of an earl that painted pictures, except it were for amusement? Equally, of course, you will marry money. The exigencies of your position render that imperative. There are the two Miss Larkins—good, modest, ladylike girls, though their father was a pill doctor. Each of them will have fifteen thousand pounds when she comes of age, and, no doubt, Orlando would give another five to secure an earl for his brother-in-law. You might do worse. I'll speak to Wingfield about you to-morrow, and see whether you can't have the railway chairmanship as my successor. Marry Fanny Larkins, and stick to Wingfield; there's your programme, and in a dozen years, if you play your cards well, you ought to be worth a hundred thousand pounds."

To all this Clement yielded a tacit acquiescence. If his father's last hours would be rendered more easy by the thought that everything would be done in accordance with his wishes, why disturb him by urging anything to the contrary? Soon he would be where the sum of this world's troubles and anxieties is of less account than the lightest snowflake that drops through the midnight on the summit of Mont Blanc.

The earl passed a restless night and was a little light-headed at times. He seemed better in the morning, and was able to see Mr. Wellclose for half

an hour. During the rest of the day Clement never left him for more than a minute or two at a time. It was evident that he was growing weaker with every hour. He ceased to talk much as the afternoon advanced, but seemed content to lie with closed eyes, but not asleep, and with one of Clement's hands in his—thinking, who shall say of what?

As the autumn daylight was deepening into dusk he fell asleep, and Dr. Ward, coming in about that time, pronounced it doubtful whether he would wake again. Nor, indeed, did he, to the extent of being conscious of where he was, or of recognizing those about him. By and by his mind began to wander again. At five minutes before twelve he died. His last faintly murmured words were, "Where's your hand, Kitty? I can't see you in the dark."

When the earl's will came to be read it was found that he had left Clement all he had to leave, with the exception of fifty guineas to the child whose life he had saved at the expense of his own.

As soon as the funeral was over—the earl being buried in the same grave with his wife—Clement went quietly back to his painting. Mr. Wingfield and Mr. Plume had proffered their services in various ways, but Clement loved his art too well to be tempted from it into the more glittering paths of financial speculation. He went back to his studio as he had left it, plain Clement Fildew. Not even to Tony Macer did he breathe a word concerning the strange things that had befallen him. He simply said that his father was dead, and that was all. Not from his lips should the world ever hear a word re-

specting that title which he was told he could now claim, but which he was determined utterly to abjure. Not even to Cecilia would he speak of it till they should be husband and wife. Of course, his marriage would now have to be delayed a little while. Cecilia had gained her point in this matter, but after a fashion she had never dreamed of. In those hours of trouble the white wings of her love seemed to fold Clement more closely round than they had ever done before.

Mr. Slingsby Boscombe took an early opportunity of putting a number of questions to Mr. Flicker respecting the earl and his son. Of the latter individual the lawyer knew absolutely nothing. He had been as much astounded to hear of the existence of such a person as the countess had been, and he blamed himself severely for having allowed himself to be so thoroughly duped by the earl's plausible, off-handed assumption that he had never been anything but a bachelor. With regard to the earl he told Slingsby pretty nearly all that he knew.

One morning, about three weeks after the funeral, Clement was surprised at his studio by a visit from Mr. Boscombe. The latter, acting on the information given him by Flicker, had gone in the first instance to the Brown Bear, and had there ascertained Mr. Fildew's late address. From Hayfield Street he had been directed to Clement's lodgings, and from there to the studio.

"I was awfully sorry not to have met you at Brimley, but the dowager carried me off by main force," said Slingsby, after shaking hands heartily with Clem,

and condoling with him on his loss. "I hope you won't for one moment think that I bear you the slightest ill-will on account of losing the title. I assure you that I care nothing for it. I take no interest in politics. I am not cut out for shining in society. All I ask for is a little den in the country, with a big garden, a horse or two, plenty of fishing, and a few friends whose tastes are something like my own."

"I wish with all my heart that the title were yours," said Clem. "It is a useless acquisition, as far as I am concerned."

"But you are not going to let it remain in abeyance, I hope?"

"I certainly am. What has a poor painter to do with titles? My only ambition is to be known by my works."

Then, little by little, and with considerable hesitation and stammering, the real object of Slingsby's visit was made apparent. He wanted Clement to share with him the income which, as soon as he should be twenty-five years old, would begin to accrue to him from the Loughton property, in accordance with the will of the last earl but one. "Such a will ought never to have been made," said Slingsby, "unless it had first been ascertained beyond doubt that there was no direct heir in existence. So, with your permission, we will divide the money between us, and even then I shall have more than I shall know what to do with."

Clement, of course, would agree to no such proposition. The world should know him only as Clem-

ent Fildew, a painter of pictures for his daily bread. Slingsby was evidently much disappointed. Finding all his arguments of no avail, he rose to go; but, before leaving, he took a glance round the room at the various canvases, finished and unfinished, some of them Clem's and some Tony Macer's, that were either stretched on the easels or hanging on the walls. Over the fireplace hung a little sketch in crayons of two female heads. "I ought to know those faces," said Slingsby, as soon as his eyes lighted on the sketch. "One of them is the likeness of my cousin Cecilia, and the other that of her friend, Miss Browne."

"Yes. I had the honor of painting Miss Collumpton's portrait—and also that of Miss Browne."

The tell-tale color rushed to Clement's face as he finished speaking. Slingsby, slow of apprehension in some things, did not fail to notice this.

"Here's a romance!" he muttered to himself. "I verily believe our friend the earl has fallen in love with the stately Mora. Just the kind of girl to take a painter's eye."

"If it would not be looked upon as an intrusion," said Slingsby, as he stood for a moment with Clement's hand in his, "I should like to bring a couple of friends of mine to-morrow morning to see one or two of the things you have here."

"I shall be very pleased to see both you and your friends," said Clement, heartily.

A little before noon next day Slingsby, Cecilia, and Mora alighted at the door of Clement's studio. Slingsby had got the girls to promise overnight that

they would go with him next morning to see some pictures, painted by a friend of his, which he was very anxious they should not miss. Absorbed in conversation, neither Cecilia nor Mora noticed in which direction they were being driven, and it was not till the brougham drew up that they discovered where they were. They interchanged looks of consternation which were not lost on Slingsby.

"This is Mr. Fildew's studio," said Cecilia. "We have been here before."

"I am quite aware of that," answered Slingsby. "But since you were here last Mr. Fildew has painted a really remarkable picture, which I am very anxious that you should see."

After this there was nothing for it but to make their way to the studio, and leave the result to the chapter of accidents.

As they entered the room Clement put down his brush and palette and came forward to greet them. But, before any one else had time to say a word, Slingsby burst in. "Permit me to have the honor of introducing you to the Earl of Loughton," he said. "Your lordship has met these ladies before. My cousin, Miss Collumpton: Miss Browne."

"The Earl of Loughton!" exclaimed both ladies, in a breath.

"Miss Collumpton! Miss Browne!" gasped Clement, as he gripped Slingsby by the arm. "You are mistaken. This is Miss Collumpton, and this"—taking Cecilia by the hand—"is Miss Browne, whom, now that you have told her something which I did not intend her to know for a long time to

come, I beg to introduce to you as my promised wife."

In speechless bewilderment Slingsby stared from one to the other. Twice he strove to speak, but words failed him. Cecilia and Mora, too, were like people lost in a maze, while on Clement's face there was a look of fatuity such as no one had ever seen there before.

And so the curtain falls, and our little tragi-comedy comes to an end.

Clement and Cecilia were married the following spring, when the woodland ways were all aglow with bursting buds and delicate blooms. After the wedding they set out for Italy, which Clement had long been desirous of visiting for artistic purposes. His brush and palette are still as dear to him as ever they were, and Cecilia does not wish it otherwise. He still paints under his old name of Clement Fildew, and in the Republic of Art he is known by no other.

The Dowager Countess of Loughton shut her doors inexorably against the new earl and his wife. She vowed that she would never see Cecilia again, and she kept her word. She died in the winter following her niece's marriage, and bequeathed all she was possessed of to Mr. Boscombe. She died in ignorance of Slingsby's marriage, otherwise she would probably have altered her will at the last moment.

Slingsby lives the life of a quiet country gentleman, and in it he finds his happiness. He is lord-lieutenant of his county, but beyond that he has no ambition, political or otherwise. He has a large fam-

ily and a large estate. He is a pattern husband, an excellent father, and the best angler within twenty miles of his house. He has also some capital shooting, which his friends do not fail to appreciate.

Miss Browne succeeded in the ambition of her life: slow, steady patience such as hers generally does succeed in the long run. A rich iron-master saw her, approved of her, proposed, and was accepted. Mora lives at a splendid place in Wales, and is happy in her cold, stately, unsympathetic way. It is to be hoped that her husband, who is said by some people to have married her for love, is equally satisfied.

Tony Macer now writes A.R.A. after his name, and the dignity will lose nothing at his hands. He is still a bachelor, and likely to remain one. His house in St. John's Wood is presided over by a lame sister, and has a crowd of poor relations perpetually hovering round it; but Tony is never so happy as when doing a kindness to some one. He and "Clement Fildew" are as great chums as ever they were, and smoke many a "short gun" together over their talk of days gone by, and the pictures they hope to paint in days to come. Mr. Macer's portrait of Lady Loughton in last year's Academy was one of the hits of the season.

THE END.

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
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